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Title: Continuity and Change: The Role of Trade Unions  
in State Industrial Relations Policy in Britain  
1910-1921

by

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### Abbreviations

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ASE   | AMALGAMATED SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS                         |
| ASLEF | AMALGAMATED SOCIETY OF LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEERS &<br>FIREMEN |
| BOT   | BOARD OF TRADE   |
| CWC   | CLYDE WORKERS COMMITTEE                                  |
| DORA  | DEFENCE OF THE REALM ACT                                 |
| E&STF | ENGINEERING AND SHIPBUILDING TRADES FEDERATION           |
| ETU   | ELECTRICAL TRADES UNION                                  |
| ILP   | INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY                                 |
| L&SW  | LONDON AND SOUTH WEST RAILWAYS                           |
| MFGB  | MINERS FEDERATION OF GREAT BRITAIN                       |
| MOL   | MINISTRY OF LABOUR                                       |
| MOW   | MUNITIONS OF WAR   |
| NIC   | NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL CONFERENCE                           |
| NTWF  | NATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS FEDERATION                    |
| NUR   | NATIONAL UNION OF RAILWAYMEN                             |
| PJC   | PROVISIONAL JOINT COMMITTEE                              |
| SDF   | SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION                             |
| SLP   | SOCIALIST LABOUR PARTY                                   |
| SSM   | SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENT                                   |
| STUC  | SCOTTISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS                           |
| SWMF  | SOUTH WALES MINERS FEDERATION                            |
| TUC   | TRADES UNION CONGRESS                                    |

### Summary

This thesis examines continuity and change and the role of trade unions in state industrial relations policy in Britain in the period 1910-21.

Contrary to orthodox interpretations which point to a watershed during World War 1, it is argued that state industrial relations policy remained remarkably consistent in this period.

To a significant extent this consistency was due to the scale and character of worker organisation. The influence of syndicalism and industrial unionism added a new and threatening dimension to worker organisation because of the emphasis these movements placed on empowering the rank and file rather than trade union leaders. This shift was perceived as a threat to the national interest- which forced the state to intervene but limited the forms which intervention could take.

The form of intervention with the fewest repercussions was conciliation which involved the promotion of "responsible" trade unionism. This policy was based on the idea that responsibly led trade unions acted as a discipline and control on their members. They could prevent industrial conflict from reaching the point where repressive state intervention became inevitable.

This view of trade union leadership is a central theme in an influential body of literature in industrial relations known as "rank and fileism". The thesis highlights the problems with this approach between 1910 and 1921 notably that the actions of trade union leaders' were less significant than those of the rank and file. It argues for a more sophisticated and qualified version of rank and fileism.

### Introduction

This thesis examines continuity and change and the role of trade unions in the British state's management of industrial conflict in the years 1910-21. It explores the constraints placed on state and trade union action by industrial conflict in this period. It develops a detailed sociology of industrial relations drawing on primary archive sources. I have chosen this period as the focus for the study because it has been frequently portrayed as 'the last great revolutionary period in British history characterised by the sheer growth of numbers in the unions; by the working days lost through strikes; by the upsurge of socialist organisation, campaigning, ideas; by the intensity and range of debate over tactics and strategy of the struggle for socialism ... these years mark a climax of class conscious self activity among the workers which, in Britain, has not been surpassed.'<sup>1</sup> The unprecedented outburst of industrial unrest in this period was accompanied by an unprecedented increase in state intervention in industrial relations.<sup>2</sup>

The great increases in industrial conflict, in trade unionism and in state intervention have made this period the subject of many studies in industrial relations and it is generally agreed in the literature relating to this period that the First World War marked

a turning point in the state's management of industrial relations although there are many contradictory interpretations of the character of state intervention, the reasons for its growth and its impact.

With a few notable exceptions (upon which the thesis builds) accounts of industrial unrest during 1910-21 have tended to emphasise the penal and military aspects of the state's response and have neglected conciliation, no doubt because analyses of the latter cannot compete with emotionally charged accounts of strikes, riots, murder and arson. It is the argument of this thesis however that a different view of the state's management of industrial conflict and the role of trade unions, emerges when an analysis of the origins and development of its policy of conciliation is added. This policy originated well before the period under study and continued to expand throughout it.

Three influential approaches have been developed which offer varying accounts of labour unrest at this time. These accounts say something distinctive about the machinery of industrial relations which developed in this period including the role of trade unionism and collective bargaining systems. The rest of the introduction will outline these different interpretations and set out my alternative account, the specific contribution which my thesis makes and the set of questions I will address.

### The Revolutionary School

The first of these interpretations belongs to what is commonly referred to as the 'revolutionary' school.<sup>3</sup> Representatives of the revolutionary school include Hinton, Price, Burgess, Holton and Hyman.<sup>4</sup> These authors develop a critique of orthodox interpretations of the evolutionary development of British industrial relations systems.<sup>5</sup> Whilst these analysts do not represent a coherent body, they all direct attention to the importance of informal workplace struggles and organisation in the study of industrial relations in this period. This interpretation arose in response to the reappearance of unofficial organisations based on the workplace during the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

In a broad ranging reassessment of the changing structure of the working class and the implementation of collective bargaining, the revolutionary school produced what has come to be regarded as the dominant account of the determinants of and the role of trade unions in industrial relations labour policy between 1910 and 1921.

For Hinton, state labour policy during this crisis was determined by the need 'to reinforce the disciplinary functions of the employer',<sup>7</sup> assisted by trade union officialdom leaving the unofficial labour movement to

'resist the wartime offensive of the state and the employers against traditional working class rights.'<sup>8</sup> Hinton argues that the outbreak of the war allowed the state to increase its powers of surveillance and coercion and by appearing to concede to the demands of organised labour it was able to co-opt trade union leaders into the 'Servile State'.<sup>9</sup> This increase in state compulsion, the acceleration of changes in working conditions and the 'betrayal' of skilled workers by their elected leaders led to the transmutation of forms of rank and file organisation from a response to the problems of craft regulation into a radical challenge to the industrial and political status quo which was severely repressed by the state on the employers' behalf. The leaders of organised labour were however only recognised by the Government so long as this recognition served the Government's purposes. The trade unions had become 'a part of the social machinery of the State' but only in the most subordinate capacity, and without tenure ... the primary result of this collaboration was not to extend working class power into the state machine but to complete the process, already well advanced before the war, by which the leaders of the organised workers were divorced from their members.'<sup>10</sup>

Burgess argues that the increase in trade unionists at the outbreak of war gave their organisations an official presence with government that had not existed

before the war. This prompted government efforts to cultivate friendships with trade union leaders, to agree to separate negotiations with them and to "manage" the implementation of government policy in a way that would win the unions' active cooperation. This incorporation of trade union leaders was an essential part of state manpower policy designed to smooth the working of industrial relations during the emergency. It achieved the opposite effect by driving a wedge between the trade union leadership and the rank and file and weakening the control exercised by union leaders over it. This gave unrest an increasingly workplace orientation which became more menacing 'as the institutions of "civil society" were steadily embraced beneath the umbrella of government tutelage. In consequence, the scope of social unrest became circumscribed to attacks on state power itself.'<sup>11</sup>

Price, Holton and Hyman focus attention on how the state's recognition of trade union leaders enabled employers to use union leaders to moderate the demands of their members and enforce unpopular settlements on the rank and file. Trade union leaders became part of the machinery designed to subordinate organised labour. For Price the involvement of union bureaucracy in the collective bargaining process increased discontent and was the essential stimulus to labour unrest.<sup>12</sup> Union leaders exchanged traditional trade union practices for collective bargaining rights and this loss of power in

the workplace intensified militancy amongst the rank and file.

Holton argues that in this period the state began to favour incorporation as a form of social control in response to the extension of labour movement strength.<sup>13</sup> Moreover the incorporation of union officials into state sponsored conciliation schemes furthered the syndicalist cause since union leaders distanced themselves from rank and file agitation and direct action seemed the only alternative. Sabel<sup>14</sup> also argues that during WWI the subjugation of labour resulted from the manner in which union leaders collaborated with the state in administering the war economy.

Hyman offers a more sophisticated analysis in arguing that rather than there being a clearly defined bureaucracy separate from a coherent and self conscious rank and file membership intra - union relations were highly complex with shifting interest groups and bureaucratic tendencies at many levels. He nevertheless reinforces Trotsky's view that class collaboration has been a long run feature of trade unionism in Britain 'it was not a case of workers' control over capital but of the subserviency of the labour bureaucracy to capital'.<sup>15</sup>



In summary, this approach argues firstly that state policy sought to incorporate the trade unions. Secondly that trade union bureaucracy defuses the radical aspirations of the rank and file imposing, unpopular settlements upon them. Thirdly that participation in national collective bargaining machinery by trade union leaders was a major cause of industrial unrest.

### **Corporatism**

The second influential interpretation of this period is the corporatist view implicit in the work of Marwick<sup>16</sup> and explicit in Middlemas.<sup>17</sup> Middlemas takes a view of industrial events virtually identical to that of the revolutionary school but portrays the state in more neutral colours. Middlemas's central point is that in the period 1916-21 'a new form of harmony in the political system was established which changed the governance of the country quantitatively as well as qualitatively'<sup>18</sup>. Middlemas's idea of 'corporate bias' states that a triangular pattern of cooperation was established between government, labour and capital which led to the elevation of trade unions and employers' associations to a new sort of status, from interest groups they became governing institutions. Trade unions' new role was premised on their acceptance of the need to manage discontent and abandon the ideology of class conflict. By 1921 therefore, trade unions had crossed a threshold which had never existed

before the war and behaved thereafter as estates of the realm.<sup>19</sup>

Middlemas argues firstly that trade unions were not incorporated in a collaborationist sense but came to share some of the political power and attributes of the state itself. Secondly, that the Great War was a watershed in British politics - there were no significant continuities in the state's management of industrial unrest before and after the war.

#### Revisionist Interpretations

The third major approach purports to offer a thoroughgoing revision of these conventional views and is represented by the work of Reid, Zeitlin, Wrigley and Adams.<sup>20</sup> The revisionists argue against the revolutionary school's incorporation thesis. Reid for instance argues that the importance of independent shop floor organisation has been exaggerated. Only a very small minority of unionists accepted the radical critique of officialdom and during the war the representatives of workers' grievances still came from official trade unionism.<sup>21</sup> There was, he argues 'no serious revolutionary crisis,' no significant 'revolutionary impulse towards independent rank and file organisation,' and 'no sustained government strategy to contain it.'<sup>22</sup> Zeitlin notes that in industries where labour was weak, conciliation

machinery brought tangible gains for the unions which would not have been conceded had individual employers been given a free hand.<sup>23</sup> Revisionists thus suggest that incorporation was not a main cause of industrial unrest between 1914 and 1921. Adams argues that the importance of conciliation machinery as a cause of unrest has been greatly overstated. He substitutes the view of the revolutionary school with the notion that where workers rebelled against conciliation they desired its reform or extension into new areas rather than its destruction. The revisionists also pour scorn on the idea that trade union bureaucracy defused the radical aspirations of the rank and file. Reid and Zeitlin deny that the interests of the rank and file and the trade union leadership were necessarily divergent. Zeitlin questions the juxtaposition of a theoretically militant membership and a theoretically conservative leadership emphasising the passivity and conservatism of the rank and file.<sup>24</sup>

These views about the relationship between trade union officials and their members represent a critique of an influential body of literature which is central to this thesis, known as "rank and filism"<sup>25</sup>.

#### **Rank and Filism**

Building on the ideas of Michels<sup>26</sup> and the Webbs<sup>27</sup>, rank and filist literature emphasises the fundamental

division between the interests of the official trade union leadership and those of the membership. In this view the process of collective bargaining and the contradictory role of trade unions in capitalism are seen as the sources of the division. Broadly it is argued that, since trade unions' long term survival depends on bargaining with employers over the wages and conditions of their members, they must to some extent make themselves acceptable to employers. This acceptance is premised on their prior agreement on market criteria for wage settlements and managerial authority in the workplace. These compromises inevitably involve the unions in moderating the demands of their members, discouraging struggles for control at work and restricting demands to wage issues which are acceptable to employers. The need to uphold collective agreements, particularly where they are the result of formal procedures such as conciliation and arbitration, 'ultimately leads them to adopt an active role in sustaining managerial discipline in the factory.'<sup>28</sup>

Adherents of the rank and file interpretation however take the analysis further by arguing that workers unlike trade union leaders, have no vested interest in the capitalist order and their exploitation in the workplace periodically leads them to struggle against managerial authority and the trade union structures and collective bargaining procedures which stifle autonomous action. For Zeitlin the logical conclusion

of this argument is that 'under propitious circumstances, as during and immediately after the First World War, such insurgent movements can come to challenge not only the structure of factory authority, but also the stability of the state itself.'<sup>29</sup> While acknowledging differences of interpretation among the "rank and filists" as to the relationship between workplace militancy and politics, Zeitlin finds that they broadly subscribe to two underlying but highly problematic assumptions. Firstly that trade unions as organisations have an inherent interest in accommodation with capitalism and their members do not and secondly that workers have a vast reservoir of latent power which is contained by trade unions. Although few rank and filists explicitly endorse this second assumption, Zeitlin notes that without it there would be no reason why the supposed caution of trade union leaders should become a point of criticism or why autonomous regulation and informality should always be considered as rational and natural.

For Zeitlin there are empirical as well as conceptual difficulties which present major problems for the rank and filists. Firstly there is the difficulty of separating the "bureaucracy" and the "rank and file" when there is no clear line of demarcation between them. Price in particular understates the heterogeneity of trade union leaders and grossly exaggerates the homogeneity of "ordinary workers" and the "rank and

file". Industries like building and engineering were deeply riven with sectional divisions whether based on occupation, skill, locality, ethnicity or gender. Secondly, even if we could differentiate clearly can we confidently identify trade union officialdom with moderation and the rank and file with militancy when there is much evidence that leaders were often more militant than their members? Thirdly he argues, recent historical research has shown the importance of central coordination in sustaining job controls and the responsiveness of even the most authoritarian unions to pressure from below. Fourthly, conciliation and arbitration procedures have been taken by rank and filist historians (Burgess and Price) to represent the nadir of union accommodation to the rules of the capitalist game; pegging wages to market criteria and subjecting workers to unchallenged managerial authority in the workplace. Several recent studies of the practical operation of these procedures are cited by Zeitlin as evidence that these procedures were opposed by employers and once they were in place they operated to safeguard workers' control over production.

Zeitlin notes that the various authors who adopt this approach are aware of these difficulties and have consequently hedged their positions with significant qualifications but, he argues, in so doing they have not accounted for these difficulties within the framework of rank and filism, only expanded the

paradigm's empirical reference at the expense of its explanatory power.

This debate looms large in studies of industrial conflict before, during and immediately after WWI which was marked by widespread unofficial strike activity led by the shop stewards' movement. It is therefore central to this thesis which takes up some of these issues by focusing on the role of trade unions and their leaders in the state's management of industrial conflict in this period. The thesis examines the role of trade unions in industrial relations policy through an analysis of the sources from which it derived at this time. This is necessary because the recent and extensive discussions have lacked detailed empirical work based on these sources for the whole of the period. Addressing the role of the state in industrial relations policy can throw light on the rank and filist debate by illuminating the assumptions the state made about the relationship of leaders and the rank and file.

#### **How Should We Research State Policy**

It could be argued that Keith Middlemas's 'Politics in Industrial Society' <sup>30</sup> has already met this requirement. This could be claimed, firstly, because this popular and influential account of the development of state intervention in industrial relations in this

crucial period draws on primary archive sources for the whole of the period. Secondly, because it is 'formidably well researched' and 'took the state as its explicit object of study,'<sup>31</sup> not only repudiating the quaint swingometer episteme of mainstream political studies (and thus converging with the proliferation of Marxist theories of the state which appeared at this moment) but also bringing to this analysis a welcome commitment to historical and concrete explanation' thus 'diverging from the unmediated abstraction which characterised the greater proportion of this oeuvre.'<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to Middlemas's 'watershed' thesis however, my research reveals significant continuities in the state's response to unrest before, during and after WW1. These continuities in state labour policy become apparent when the origins and development of the state's policy of conciliation and the theory of trade unionism which underpins it are analysed. This policy originated well before the period under study and continued to expand throughout it, making it more accurate to view the early 1890s as a more significant watershed in state industrial relations policy than WW1. My argument has important implications which prompt a reassessment of the nature of the political consensus which Middlemas argues existed until the 1960s.



Secondly a focus on the state's policy of conciliation reveals a major defect of Middlemas' analysis at the methodological level. His account rests largely on a mixture of Cabinet papers, the private papers of prominent figures of the time and secondary sources. However, while I agree that Cabinet papers are a formidable authority in that they consist of documents which are 'not written with a view to informing historians or sociologists, they are in fact secreted for the purpose of action. They are in a sense facts in themselves not merely the representation of facts,'<sup>33</sup> I would argue that this focus leads Middlemas to confuse political talk with administrative action and a clearer understanding of the state's response to industrial conflict in these years must include an analysis of the papers of the Board of Trade.

In this respect my work takes seriously Davidson's <sup>34</sup> observation that although many social, economic and labour historians have concentrated on analysing the development of state policy towards labour unrest in the period 1880-1914 they have neglected the role of the Board of Trade. Davidson regards this as a serious omission for several reasons. Firstly because the ability of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade (established 1893) to supply the relevant data and expertise made it 'the recognised information bureau on all that pertained to industrial conflicts, possessing systematic data on strikes and lockouts, trade

combinations, employment and wage rates, easy access to more general economic data and an establishment which included several experienced negotiators.<sup>35</sup> Secondly because government measures relating to industrial relations were largely determined by departmental ministers in conjunction with their permanent officials. There is no evidence to suggest that labour unrest was ever discussed in any systematic fashion by the Cabinet before 1911 - after 1911 it was frequently debated in Cabinet but the lack of consensus among Cabinet members as to the correct strategy to adopt in the face of widespread industrial conflict meant that the initiative in formulating labour policy remained with the Board of Trade. Lastly, the social and economic objectives of the Board were seen by both employers and labour leaders as the prime determinant of state industrial relations policy.<sup>36</sup>

While Davidson's analysis provides valuable insights however, his emphasis, like that of Middlemas, is largely on the personalities who populated the pre war BOT. In this thesis I will extend the analysis up to 1921 to include those institutions, the Ministry of Munitions and the Ministry of Labour, which inherited the task of formulating and implementing industrial relations policy from the BOT. From this it will become clear that regardless of the changing incumbents and seemingly new departures in industrial relations policy the latter remained remarkably consistent. This was

because what was possible in industrial relations was circumscribed to a significant extent by the degree and character of worker organisation and the state's ability to influence it without appearing to do so. It was this realisation which first engendered the state's attempt to permanently manage industrial conflict through conciliation in 1896 when the Labour Department of the Board of Trade was designated the agency for the implementation of this policy.

#### **Resume of Themes**

In analysing the role of trade unions in industrial relations policy in this period from the perspective of the policy making agencies themselves I aim to assess the limits of this policy in practice and address the points raised by critics of the rank and filist perspective.

Throughout the thesis the term 'state' will be used in preference to 'the government' since the former draws attention not only to the Cabinet but also to the institutions of the permanent Civil Service.

Industrial conflict is taken to be that expressed through strike activity, collective bargaining and

arbitration since analyses of these formed the body of knowledge amassed by the state about the underlying determinants of industrial conflict which underpinned the formulation and implementation of labour policy. The state combined this information with the views about the attitudes and mood of workers expressed by those directly concerned with industrial conflict.

The concept of the 'working class' has been a major preoccupation and a source of controversy among sociologists for more than a hundred years and there is an extensive sociological literature on the subject.<sup>37</sup> It is important to be aware however, that for the state in the period under study the term had a precise meaning. A good illustration of this precision is to be found in the report by the Labour Department of the Board of Trade to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1894. In this report the term "working class" refers to 'the industrial class ... especially that portion of the five and a half million males (in England and Wales) who are adult workmen (over ten years of age) and engaged in productive as contrasted with distributive enterprise. The class engaged in transport adds an appreciable but very vague and fluctuating contingent and the industrial population of Scotland and Ireland has to be taken into account.'<sup>38</sup> No modern day sociologist would sanction such a narrow definition of class, not least because of its blindness to gender and ethnicity. Nevertheless this is what is

meant in discussions of the working class in state papers at this time, even during the First World War when women formed an appreciable proportion of the "industrial class".

### Plan of the thesis

The thesis is organised in the following way. The first chapter provides the theoretical context for the study. It analyses the contradictory role of trade unionism and examines some of the theoretical concerns which shape the questions which are posed in the field and underpin my interpretation of industrial relations policy in the period.

Chapter two outlines the development of trade union organisation from the late 19th century in Britain with particular reference to the impact of syndicalism and industrial unionism. The aim of this chapter is to provide a basis for understanding the strategies and tactics adopted by workers and the state's deliberations on industrial unrest in the period.

Chapter three examines the origins of conciliation and arbitration in Britain and the process by which the state came to favour conciliation. Here special consideration is given to the conception of industrial conflict and trade unions which led the state to adopt

conciliation and arbitration and to set up and participate in machinery for the management of industrial conflict based on this.

Chapter four examines the 'Great Unrest' and takes up some of the themes raised in chapters one and two in relation to the revolutionary potential of trade unions. It analyses the state's interpretations of industrial conflict and of trade unionism. This analysis reveals the key parameters of the state's perception of union organisation and working class interest representation and highlights the constraints on industrial relations policy, on trade unionism and on trade union officials imposed by strong worker organisation. The experience of the Great Unrest resulted in the setting up of the first of a series of structures to address industrial conflict - the Industrial Council -in which the participation of trade unions was enlisted at what are generally regarded as key points in the development of the state's management of industrial conflict during the period 1910-21.

Chapter five focuses on the Munitions Of War Act and its implementation by the Ministry of Munitions. Here the emphasis is on the extent to which worker resistance firstly contributed to this legislation then modified its impact and finally strengthened worker organisation and led to state initiatives - the creation of the Ministry of Labour and the

implementation of the Whitley Scheme - which were based on expanding its policy of conciliation.

Chapter six looks at industrial conflict in the years 1916-18 from the perspective of the Ministry of Labour. The Ministry paid particular attention to the ways in which the policy pursued by the Ministry of Munitions hampered the management of industrial conflict. Here again the focus is on the relationship between the state and trade unions and between trade unions and their members.

Chapter seven takes as its focus the National Industrial Conference set up in response to the resurgence of large scale industrial conflict. This chapter centres on the Ministry of Labour's detailed analysis of the limits and possibilities of both state and trade union action and the notion of the National Industrial Conference as the engine of a peaceful British revolution.

Finally a concluding chapter draws together the major themes within the thesis. An appendix provides a discussion of the status of the most heavily used and cited government records in studies of this period which suggests that these should be looked at more critically.

- 1 Hinton, 1973.p14.
- 2 Burgess,1980.p176.
- 3 Reid in Tolliday and Zeitlin p46
- 4 Hinton, 1973. Price 1980. Burgess 1980. Holton 1976.  
Hyman 1979.
- 5 Dunlop, 1958. Flanders,1968. Poole, 1981.
- 6 Batstone, Boraston & Frenkel 1977. Hyman 1979.  
Nichols & Beynon, 1977.
- 7 Hinton,1973.p35.
- 8 Ibid p41.
- 9 For a discussion of this concept see Belloc 1913 pp.  
175,176 and Hinton 1973 p.44.
- 10 Ibid p54.
- 11 Burgess, 1980.p166.
- 12 Price,1980.
- 13 Holton, 1976 p33.
- 14 Sabel 1981.
- 15 Hyman, 1979 pp 54-67.
- 16 Marwick 1967.
- 17 Middlemas,1979.
- 18 Ibid p19.
- 19 Ibid pp20,21.
- 20 Reid 1985, Zeitlin 1985, Wrigley 1987, Adams 1989.
- 21 Reid In Tolliday & Zeitlin 1985 p67.
- 22 Ibid p68.
- 23 Zeitlin in Mommsen 1985 p332.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Zeitlin, 1989.



26 Michels 1911.

27 Webb 1911.

28 Ibid p46

29 Hinton, 1973. Burgess, 1975. Middlemas, 1979.

30 Middlemas 1979.ü

31 Adams used local trade union sources and focused on local disputes. Hinton focused on local shop stewards' movements and Reid focused on the British shipbuilding industry. The analyses of Burgess and Hyman rest on secondary sources. Price focuses on the building industry. McLean 1983 concentrates on a particular geographical area at a particular time

32 Schwartz, 1987 pl11.

33 Webb, S&B. 1932. p100.

34 Davidson, 1978 pp571-591.

35 Davidson 1982.

36 Ibid.

37 For an indication of the size of the literature see Crompton, 1993.

38 Fifth and Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour 1894 C 7421 p27.

Interpretations of the Role of Trade Unions in  
Industrial Relations

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse those theories of trade unionism which inform the accounts of the role of trade unions in this period which influenced the thesis. This will provide the theoretical context for the empirical examination of trade unions and their role in industrial relations policy between 1910 and 1921. It could be argued that industrial relations covers more than simply trade unionism and of course it does but the core of industrial relations is trade unionism. The thrust of the thesis is in accord with the view most clearly expressed by Allen<sup>1</sup>. This view holds that industrial relations arise out of the prime economic relationship in society which is the buying and selling of labour power and that there is perpetual interaction between the buyers and sellers for three reasons. Firstly because there is an enormous imbalance of economic power between the two classes - there are many sellers and relatively few buyers and the latter are dominant over the former in every sphere of activity through their ownership of the means of production. Secondly this imbalance is accentuated because members of the labour market possess varying

degrees of freedom to exploit this power position for their own advantages and lastly because there are unremitting pressures on buyers and sellers to use this freedom. The sellers or workers depend on the price of labour power for their own subsistence and are therefore forced to maximise it while the buyers or capitalists treat that price as a cost and so constantly try to minimise it. The result is a dynamic conflict situation - class struggle. Trade unionism is the manifestation of this conflict - it constitutes an attempt by otherwise relatively powerless individuals to redress the power imbalance. Trade unions' essential function is to overcome individual workers' weakness by substituting a collective bargain for separate individual bargaining.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the contradictory role of trade unions in capitalism and shows how internal and external pressures undermine their effectiveness as a power for their members. The second section explores the extent to which these obstacles can be overcome and whether trade unions can become the vehicle of social transformation. The chapter argues that analyses which confine themselves to measuring trade union organisation and action in terms of class consciousness are misplaced and that the correct focus for analysis of the revolutionary potential of the working class is worker organisation generally. In the period under

study industrial conflict constituted a threat to the established order because of the scale, unity and lawlessness of the worker organisation which underpinned it. Among the mass of workers there was no evidence of any widespread, consistent and informed commitment to any body of ideas whether conservative or radical.

#### Part One

Trade unions may be defined as representative organisations of workers which are based upon but transcend the collectivism of particular workplaces and localities. This wider formal organisation transforms the possibilities of shop floor representation and action by mobilising support, providing organisational resources and framing united policies - a feature which has been appreciated by state agencies as well as social commentators.

Firstly, as Hyman<sup>3</sup> emphasises, united collective organisation for workers also implies 'power over' workers, to concert activity and ensure unity. Hyman accepts that collective organisation allows workers to create social power much greater than their power as individuals but points out that the organisation of conflict also makes conflict manageable by employers and by governments. It does this by ensuring that 'grievances are brought into the open, channelled to

the appropriate authorities, expressed in a form which makes compromise possible and articulated by a bargaining partner with whom an agreement can be reached which employees will feel some commitment to observe. Thus an inescapable function of trade union action is, in Mills' terms, "the management of discontent".<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, it is important to note that although workers organised in trade unions have objective common interests,<sup>5</sup> the most fundamental of which is their common relationship of opposition and antagonism to capital and the owners of capital, consciousness of this class identity is obscured in reality by the immense variety of work contexts and work relations which characterise capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The latter may foster an inward looking unity among workers such that they see themselves primarily as boilermakers, shop assistants, employees of a particular firm or workers in a particular industry rather than in class terms.<sup>7</sup> They may be more conscious of those interests which divide them from other workers than of those which unite them. When workers organise in trade unions these divisions are naturally expressed in the organisational boundaries which shape the lines of demarcation within and between trade unions.

Other major sources of division which have debilitating effects on worker organisation are those of gender and

ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Historically trade unions have made use of two main strategies, firstly that of excluding women and ethnic minorities from paid employment and secondly that of confining women and ethnic minorities to jobs which are graded lower than those of white men in order to raise the price of their members' labour power.<sup>9</sup>

The historical development of trade unionism in Britain is also a limiting factor. The aims of early trade unions or craft societies were sociability and the provision of friendly benefits. Their role in industrial relations was secondary and they developed an industrial relations role primarily as defenders of traditional working rules and practices against either employers or other groups of workers. It was rare for them to initiate action to change working conditions. Effective craft unionism was based on the principle of unilateral control whereby the union reserved the right to determine the rules of the trade and the rates of pay and to enforce these through its own members who would boycott or leave employers who did not respect union conditions. Unions could do this because they had a monopoly of labour supply - they controlled entry to trades through apprenticeship and the enforced demarcation of their own area of work and benefit funds allowed them to support workers who could not find work on union conditions.<sup>10</sup>

The barriers erected by craft unionism were only decisively breached when shifts in the labour process in the 1890s facilitated the discovery of bargaining leverage by key groups of unskilled workers and encouraged a reorientation of some craft unions towards a wider membership in the context of deskilling. Although this was a form of unity, it tended to consolidate sectionalism by virtue of embracing a diverse membership with varied interests. In the following decades mass offensive unionism influenced by syndicalist ideas and with considerable instability of membership demonstrated that mass organisation and centralised administration did not automatically denote conservatism. However while these general unions acted as mobilising organisations responsive to rank and file pressure during their initial phases of formation, recruitment and mobilisation (and often during periods of prosperity when the confidence of unskilled workers was boosted) they developed rapidly into oligarchic "bossdoms" under the impact of employers' associations, war administration and later the depression.<sup>11</sup> There were also limits to the "general" character of the unskilled organisations and they did not encroach on the craft societies' territory or on that of the industrial type unions - coal, cotton, railways. They confined themselves to filling the gaps left by the earlier structure of trade unionism. Their open character tended to decline once they had established effective organisation and they tended to become

conscious of having sectional interests and to operate by excluding other sections of workers. Furthermore large scale organisation created a structure of organisers with distinctive experiences and priorities which posed issues of accountability and control.

These issues have usually been addressed in terms of arguments about the oligarchic and democratic features and tendencies of trade unionism though they are also intimately connected with competing notions of the whole rationale of unionism and differing strategies of organisation and recruitment. Several classic positions on these issues were developed by analysts of the labour movement who were also participants in the early period of mass working class unionism and political organisation during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The Webbs<sup>12</sup> offered a relatively "optimistic" account of the institutional resolution of a conflict between democracy and "efficiency" in the development of British trade unionism. They emphasised that as unions became involved in extended and centralised collective bargaining, they confronted the limitations of the traditional pattern of "primitive democracy" characteristic of the early craft societies (identified with mass meetings, referenda on policy issues, annual elections and rotating headquarters). With this development, they argued, unions faced the dilemma of



dictatorship by experts or parochialism and inefficiency. However this dilemma could be circumvented through a formal apparatus of representative democracy. Elected representative assemblies could be substituted for "primitive democracy" as controllers of union executives allowing unions to advance as efficient democracies.

Michels<sup>13</sup> builds on the Webbs to provide the classic "pessimistic" account of the domination of ostensibly democratic trade unions and labour parties by an oligarchy of union and party leaders. In his view oligarchy and conservative union policies were the outcome of professionalisation and bureaucracy. For Michels, trade unions must organise on a mass scale and become sophisticated in negotiations to be effective. The resulting complex of bureaucratic tasks requires specialist officials. Union moderation then becomes the norm since the need for tangible results through trade offs prompts officials to adopt a conciliatory bargaining stance. This moderation is reinforced by their concern with their new found status and by concern to recruit less committed workers into unions to maintain and increase membership. Organisational survival becomes central. 'Uncontrolled dominance' he argued, was therefore inevitable and trade union leaders' power allowed them to impose their conservative policies even where these were 'disapproved of by the majority of workers they are

supposed to represent.' This abuse of power - oligarchic control - provoked little resistance because, in the absence of adequate information or experience, members accepted that their leaders possessed a "customary right" to their positions and were willing to allow them to speak for them.

Historical and contemporary analyses of British unions have qualified and contextualised the Michelsian diagnosis of oligarchy.<sup>14</sup> They have shown that the relation between leadership and rank and file is more complex than he implies. Hyman<sup>15</sup> has pointed out firstly that if members are assumed to be subject to the informed official leadership, this implies that workers' orientation to trade unionism is instrumental and hangs on the latter's ability to deliver a satisfactory level of benefits. The frustration of these expectations may lead to a rank and file revolt. This is an important constraint on leadership autonomy. Secondly the generally accepted view that unions ought to act democratically and ensure the support of their members restricts the scope of leaders' activity. Thirdly the fact that union leaders were often lay activists before they became officials ensures that the extremes of cynical manipulation are usually avoided. Fourthly although Michels is right to emphasise the difficulty of direct membership control at national levels of decision making in unions this does not exclude membership participation and control at other

levels. For Hyman<sup>16</sup> other weaknesses of Michels argument include his neglect of the constant interaction between unions and the oligarchic organisations of capital which puts pressure on them to become similarly oligarchic. Employers and the state are often irritated by union leaders who want to consult their members before making decisions. There is also the external influence of capitalist organisations on workers which socialise them into anti-democratic values. This is reinforced by workers' direct experience of the uniformly oligarchic organisations and institutions of capitalist society and compounded by the mass media which projects anti-democratic ideas on specific issues. Lastly unions vary considerably in the extent to which they are subject to the pressures which Michels emphasises. Nevertheless critics of Michels have recognised that the growth and scale of trade union organisation means that unions certainly confront tensions between such priorities as survival, mobilisation, representation, participation, accommodation and discipline and that 'the only way to successfully defeat the oligarchic tendencies of trade unionism is to overthrow capitalism itself.'<sup>17</sup>

Given the divisions within trade unions and the conflicting priorities with which trade unions are faced a fundamental question arises for these writers - what part if any can trade unions play in the struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society?

Contrasting views linked to different analyses of the practical objectives of unions and the interests of trade unionists are examined below.

## Part Two

Pluralist analyses, from the Webbs onwards, focus on the role of trade unions as key participants in the process of collective bargaining and not as agencies of social transformation. In this context unions are seen as agencies of mobilisation, representation and discipline through which workers gain a significant though subordinate role in the joint regulation of employment conditions and substantive improvements in wages and working conditions within the established framework of (capitalist) employment relations. Such pluralist diagnoses go beyond the perspectives of "business unionism" by emphasising that the first of these objectives represents a form of "industrial citizenship", but they also define the relationship between unions and politics as strongly circumscribed by the priorities of collective bargaining.

Flanders,<sup>18</sup> analysis remains indicative of some central assumptions of industrial relations pluralism. He argues that the centrality of joint job regulation underwrites a clear division of labour between trade unionism and labourist politics. Since trade unions are primarily bargaining institutions they should not

prioritise politics above effective bargaining either by attempting to substitute for the specific political role of the Labour Party or by subordinating themselves to the claimed requirements of "national efficiency". Within this framework, however, Flanders explicitly recognises that unions must retain some sense of being a social movement and not merely an institutional structure if they are to effectively mobilise active support. This may mean championing the cause of the unorganised or advocacy of an egalitarian incomes policy. Pluralism takes an optimistic view of industrial relations assuming a roughly equal balance of power between employers and workers organised in trade unions, that workers have a responsibility to observe agreements and that any outstanding differences between them are resolved by the procedures of collective bargaining.

As Fox points out however, collective bargaining does not restore the balance of power between employers and workers because it is concerned with restricted issues and not the fundamental disparity of power between the propertied and the propertyless. Trade unions aim at marginal improvements for their members and to defend them against arbitrary management action. They do not attack management on the basic principles of the social and industrial framework such as private property, the extreme division of labour and the massive inequalities of financial reward, status, control and autonomy in

work or try to secure a foothold in the majority of decisions on management objectives, markets, capital investment and rate of expansion. They rarely seriously challenge the treatment of labour as a commodity to be hired or discarded at management's convenience. The reasons why the trade unions do not challenge the status quo are to be found in their understanding of the magnitude of employers' power supported by government and the relative passivity of the rank and file.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to pluralist analysis stands the "optimistic" marxist tradition which emphasises the potential for radicalisation and a class based oppositional or revolutionary politics which may arise out of union activity and experience. This view focuses on the instabilities and contradictions built into processes of collective bargaining and the manner in which substantive gains are circumscribed by the power of private capital and the state. It is argued that the very process of struggle, involving solidarity among workers and confrontations with employers and the state may produce "explosions of class consciousness".<sup>20</sup> Other writers have questioned the view that trade union activity can escalate almost automatically into a radical social movement characterised by mass mobilisation and a highly politicised class consciousness. Hyman notes the long standing tension between the "pessimistic" and "optimistic" marxian

analyses of the unsettled relationship between trade unions, social mobilisation and politics.<sup>21</sup>

This tension stems from the ambiguous legacy left by Marx and Engels in their treatment of trade unions. Engels saw trade unions as 'the military school of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided.' Marx later qualified this view in arguing that although unions 'work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital' they should guard against restricting themselves to a 'guerilla war against the effects of the existing system instead of simultaneously trying to change it.'<sup>22</sup> Later both Marx and Engels were scathing about the co-option of union leaders and the bourgeoisification of elite sections of the organised workers. In spite of their criticism however, Hyman suggests that Marx and Engels were optimistic about the emergence of a mass politics out of union struggles.

The "pessimistic" view is apparently codified by Lenin<sup>23</sup> in his famous contrast between trade union economism and revolutionary class consciousness. Lenin argued that trade unions were primarily concerned with economic and sectional interests and fostered only a "trade union consciousness" subservient to bourgeois ideology which is older, more developed and has many more resources available for its diffusion than its

socialist rivals. For Lenin revolutionary class consciousness could not develop spontaneously out of trade union economism and would have to be brought to the working class via the revolutionary party.

It could be argued that classical marxist theorists (in their concern to establish the need for a revolutionary party to organise and politically motivate the working class (to those "economist" intellectuals who adhered to Marx's early work in believing that capitalism's contradictions alone would engender revolutionary change) tended to neglect the relationship of consciousness to workers' experience of exploitation, the fact that the power base of trade unionism is the working class and not capital and it can reflect but not impose workers' patterns of consciousness.

Attempts to explore how far revolutionary class consciousness grew out of workers' experience of their exploitation gained momentum in Britain in the late 1960s when Goldthorpe et al <sup>24</sup> found that workers' experience outside work determined their orientations to it and this engendered a fragmentary consciousness which displayed no notion of common interest as a working class. Later research modified these conclusions and found little evidence of orientations of any sort as an organising principle of workers' lives. Instead it was argued that workers had multi - stranded priorities but were primarily concerned with



pay, job security and work content and the relative importance of these varied with life cycle factors and economic conditions. This focus produced a pattern of consciousness based on a rudimentary sense of class antagonism "them and us" overlaid with fatalism, cynicism and acceptance - "contradictory consciousness."<sup>25</sup>

These arguments gave rise to marxian analyses which capture important features of the patterns and mechanisms of consciousness and the potential for radicalisation in workplace struggle. Beynon <sup>26</sup> found that this contradictory consciousness was sometimes transcended and developed into a volatile "factory consciousness" in the course of struggle but it stopped short of revolutionary class consciousness because of trade union intervention. 'In all of these struggles the role of trade unions has been to de - escalate rather than extend the struggle between capital and labour.'

In another version of rank and filism Mann<sup>27</sup> points out that this union response is not a betrayal of the working class by its leaders. Instead it is rooted in workers' experience of exploitation. Through unions workers bargain on a terrain defined by capital which is characterised by the ideological separation between economics and politics, production and consumption, though not without struggle. This struggle teaches them

that economic demands sometimes get results but control issues don't so workers take what they can get and dismiss what is denied them as unimportant "pragmatic accommodation". Their experience gives them a sense of class identity and location but not a sense of the totality of class relations or of any alternative society which would be a prerequisite of revolutionary class consciousness. Unions reflect this dual consciousness to the extent that they pursue economic and job control issues separately and the latter defensively and as long as they do this, no matter how aggressively, they are a profoundly conservative force which works to weaken class consciousness.

For Hyman<sup>28</sup> however it is precisely unions' economic focus which produces situations of radical instability for capital because it hangs on capital's ability to satisfy workers' demands. The level of demands which can be accommodated varies according to the economic context and stagnation means that improved wages can't be financed out of economic growth. Trade union activity also raises issues of power and control or at least 'the demand not to be controlled disagreeably'<sup>29</sup> which can form the basis for far more explicit "political" demands and runs through all trade union activity.

While the above contributions represent the major positions within industrial relations debate on union and class activity, there have been some important

challenges to some of their assumptions from other analysts of class relations. In particular De Ste.Croix has argued that to restrict the notion of class struggle to occasions where an overt struggle on the political plane, involving class consciousness on both sides, can be shown to exist, is inadequate. He clarifies 'the very common conception of class struggle which refuses to regard it as such unless it includes class consciousness and active political conflict (as some Marxists do) is to water it down to the point where it virtually disappears in many situations. It is then possible to deny altogether the very existence of class struggle ... merely because in each case the exploited class concerned does not or did not have any "class consciousness" or take any political action in common except on very rare occasions and to a very limited degree. But ... bring back exploitation as the hallmark of class, and at once class struggle is at the forefront, as it should be.'<sup>30</sup> It will then become clear that 'The essence of the relationship of classes in a class society founded on the existence of private property in the means of production, is the economic exploitation which is the very *raison d'être* of the whole class system ... If the division into economic classes is in its very nature the expression of the way in which above all exploitation is effected ... then there is to that extent an unceasing struggle between exploited and exploiting classes.'<sup>31</sup>

For De Ste. Croix even if workers were precluded from playing any sort of political role and had no chance of taking industrial action in their own defence (which was not the case from the mid 19th century) the very existence of an exploited class has important consequences not only in the economic sphere but also socially and politically. The very existence of classes involves tension and conflict between the classes.'For even if only the masters could carry it on effectively: they would always be united, and be prepared to act ... the masters conduct a permanent struggle ... in the very act of holding down their slaves ... but in a sense even slaves who are kept in irons and driven with a whip can conduct some kind of passive resistance, if only by quiet sabotage and breaking a tool or two.'<sup>32</sup> Given this De Ste.Croix argues, the only definition of class struggle that makes sense is one that proceeds from the fact of exploitation and takes account of its nature and intensity. Class struggle is a permanent feature of human society above primitive levels. It does not necessarily involve collective action by a class as such and it may or may not include activity on a political plane although such activity becomes increasingly probable when the tension of class struggle becomes acute.<sup>33</sup> In setting up a permanent state agency for the analysis and management of industrial conflict in this period, the state reveals

its awareness of class struggle as an unceasing struggle between exploited and exploiting classes and of worker organisation as the manifestation of this struggle.

A second important distinction confirmed by this study concerns the conflation of worker organisation and trade unionism. This distinction emerges in Price's <sup>34</sup> analysis of 19th century worker organisation. Price shows that worker organisation generally was the problem for employers and not trade unionism per se. Price distinguishes between trade movements and trade unions. The former were separate and distinct from any union organisation. They emanated from organisational efforts in a few shops which brimmed over to a district or town and the sources of authority flowed upwards from the mass to the leadership. He also argues that employers' complaints about the restrictions which unions imposed on their activities (e.g. control over labour supply, rules restricting output, rules against overtime, opposition to machinery, enforcement of standard rates and the regulation of apprenticeship) have been misunderstood. These restrictions were commonly associated with trade union organisation. There was however a disjuncture between the number of trade unionists and their supposed power and influence. The restrictions employers encountered were typically those of the workgroup and bore little relationship to

union existence and function.<sup>35</sup> He emphasises that "union" was likely to have meant any attempt by workers to act in union such that "unions" were a 'rhetorical target.' Lastly he draws attention to the fact that militancy was not the sole preserve of unionists. Union men complained that non-unionists were hot headed and reckless.<sup>36</sup>

For the state, worker organisation was the problem. Worker organisation was typical 'of the association of working men in masses',<sup>37</sup> and strikes and violence were 'ordinary incidents of the association of working men in masses' to which responsible trade unionism 'brings an increased sense of order, subordination and reflection.'<sup>38</sup>

The key feature of worker organisation for the state was not that it displayed class consciousness among workers but that it highlighted their lack of consistent or informed commitment to any one set of beliefs. This was 'dry material' which could be set ablaze 'by a chance spark.'<sup>39</sup> On a large scale it possessed the 'potential for action of a more concerted kind, both industrial and political, the ultimate threat of which is to create a major degree of economic dislocation and civil disturbance ... This potential requires and reflects, on the one hand, the readiness, under certain conditions, of a working class ... to

"hold up the country to ransom" ... the relative weakness of its moral and social integration into the existing order; and, on the other hand, its reserves of grass roots solidarity on which concerted organisational strategies can draw.'<sup>40</sup>

The dry material was set ablaze in 1910. The chance spark was a peculiarly British hybrid of syndicalism and industrial unionism which fuelled the massive strikes in the period under study. The state was forced to intervene to minimise economic dislocation and civil disturbance. Paradoxically however this intervention revealed that 'it is the degree and forms of state intervention in "mass strikes" as well as the scale of strike action, that have a crucial impact on workers' consciousness.' It was recognised that repressive intervention by the state was likely to engender class consciousness - 'the feeling that all workers share a common plight and a common enemy ... The more forcefully the state intervenes the more likely it is to polarise society around two major social classes and create the preconditions for an escalation of working class political consciousness.'<sup>41</sup> This realisation underpinned the state's concern with projecting an image of impartiality in dispute resolution in this period.

The next chapter will outline the development of trade union organisation from the late 19th century in Britain and assess the impact of syndicalism and industrial unionism on this development. The aim is firstly to provide a background for understanding the tactics and strategies adopted by workers, their leaders and the state which are analysed in the later empirical chapters. Secondly to show that the conflation of two separate movements with diverse origins, aims and objectives by analysts of industrial conflict in this period has given rise to a misunderstanding of the dynamics of industrial conflict. This confusion has often meant that the role of workers in industrial conflict has taken second place to that of trade union leaders and state officials in the existing literature on this important period.



- 1 Allen, 1971 p.9.
- 2 Dobb, 1959 p.160.
- 3 Hyman, 1975 p.195
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 These flow from lack of ownership or control over the means of production, being forced to sell their labour power in the labour market, being subordinated to a hierarchy of managerial control, insecure employment, lack of autonomy in work, poor pay and working conditions.
- 6 Hyman, 1975 p.42.
- 7 Mann, 1973.
- 8 Kelly, 1988.
- 9 Walby, 1986 p.244.
- 10 Turner, 1962 pp.180-182. Lane 1974. Hobsbawm, 1964.
- 11 Turner, 1962 pp.201-232. Hyman 1971.
- 12 Webb, S&B. 1897.
- 13 Michels, 1968. (1911 & 1915)
- 14 Crouch, 1982. Kelly, 1988.
- 15 Hyman, 1971 pp.28-33.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Clarke, 1978 p.18.
- 18 Flanders, 1968.
- 19 Fox, 1978. pp.130-151.
- 20 Kelly, 1988 Chapt 5.
- 21 Hyman, 1971 passim.

- 22 For an overview see Lapidès, 1987.
- 23 Lenin, 1902.
- 24 Goldthorpe et al, 1968.
- 25 Blackburn and Mann, 1979.
- 26 Beynon, 1973.
- 27 Mann, 1973.
- 28 Hyman, 1971.
- 29 Goodrich 1975.
- 30 De Ste.Croix, 1983 p.57.
- 31 Ibid p.66.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid p44.
- 34 Price, 1980.
- 35 Price, 1980 p.62.
- 36 Ibid p.67.
- 37 Royal Commission on Trade Unions 1867.
- 38 Ibid p.36.
- 39 PRO CAB 37/107/70 Report of the Labour Department of  
the Board of Trade to the Cabinet 25th of July 1911.
- 40 Goldthorpe, 1978 p.208.
- 41 Kelly, 1988. pp.122,127.

## Chapter 2

### The Impact of Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism on Trade Unions

For much of the 19th century trade union organisation in Britain was dominated by craft workers in exclusive craft associations. Unions in the craft industries were built on apprenticeship and on customs which had persisted from before the industrial revolution.<sup>1</sup> Craft societies built on custom to delimit a preserve of craftsmen's work defined sometimes by the material, sometimes by the tools and machinery and sometimes by the product. This preserve was defended against the unqualified, against changes in the organisation of production or techniques and against encroachment by other crafts.<sup>2</sup> Craft rules occasionally led to conflict but widespread conflict and bargaining with employers were untypical of craft unionism. It was craft unions' contention that craftsmen should regulate 'what we alone have a right to regulate, the value of our labour.'<sup>3</sup>

Every craft union provided friendly benefits. Firstly because there were advantages in disguising a trade society as a friendly society when the latter was accepted by employers and protected by the law. Secondly they were a vital element in their control of

working conditions. Benefits made union members a cohesive force 'any member who had been paying in for some years was likely to feel he had an investment not likely to be sacrificed.'<sup>4</sup>

The strike was used to prevent infringements of the rules in particular shops and to extend a society's control of shops not previously organised. The technique of withdrawing small groups of men or individuals known as the 'strike in detail' was used to enforce craft rules without large scale conflict with employers. Strikers were supported by unemployment benefit not strike pay.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 19th century craft unions were increasingly threatened by technical change. In industries created by the industrial revolution, such as the railways, there were no hallowed customs and no traditional basis for apprenticeship. Other industries, particularly coal, iron and cotton, were so profoundly altered that protective customs, where they existed, were swept away. New skills were acquired by experience and by promotion from less skilled to more skilled without formal apprenticeship.<sup>6</sup>

Workers in these industries earned more than labourers but these industries were subject to trade fluctuations. Craft unions' resistance to the assault on their exclusiveness and workers' relative weakness

in these industries gave rise to the formation of separate and comparatively open trade unions (industrial-type unions) which were more dependent on the strike and collective bargaining.<sup>7</sup> They were vertically open in that they organised workers with varying degrees of skill, but horizontally closed in that they did not attempt to organise outside of the boundaries of their own industries and they excluded labourers.

Early organisations of labourers tended to be transient both because of their insecure position in the labour market and because of craft opposition. The year 1889 however, marked an enormous burst of trade union growth and industrial conflict especially in industries and occupations which had previously been poorly organised or unorganised. These were the 'new unions' commonly understood as socialist-led unions of unskilled labourers who revolted against the exclusive and selfish trade unionism of the crafts.<sup>8</sup>

New unionism was not based on a single principle of organisation but aimed to fill in the gaps left by existing forms of trade unionism by organising unions for the general run of workers in one or more industries. This was not a new departure and had been pioneered long before by the Weavers, the Boot and Shoe Operatives, the Railway Servants and to some extent, the Miners.

The new unions however, applied this principle on a wider scale among seamen, dockers, gasworkers, chemical workers, transport workers and recruited less skilled workers in industries where only the skilled were organised. The new unions adopted this form unintentionally. As they set out to organise particular groups of workers they found other workers keen to join and their industrial coverage expanded. These unions therefore became general not as a result of any coherent policy or tactics but because union officials welcomed the subscriptions of those 'clamouring to join.'<sup>9</sup>

There is much evidence of ruthless behaviour by union bureaucrats to maximise membership numbers. Dockers' and seamen's unions set about crushing and eliminating rival unions and poaching their members.<sup>10</sup> Most new unions were intended by their members to be sectional unions but pressure of circumstances and the influence of their officials made them general. Clegg, Fox and Thomson point out, in addition, that not all of the new unions were composed of the unskilled and low paid or were against friendly benefits and had low subscriptions. They also emphasise that not all new unions were socialist and/or militant. Nevertheless most analysts including Clegg, Fox and Thomson believe that most of the new unions used militant and coercive tactics <sup>11</sup> and the new unions have been typically

viewed as being committed to a 'fighting policy based upon class solidarity and directed by implication at any rate against capitalism itself.'<sup>12</sup>

The source of this fighting policy has been traced by influential commentators to new union leaders such as Tom Mann who introduced syndicalism - 'a socialism far removed from the jolly fellowship of Robert Blatchford, the hygienic bureaucracy of the Fabians or the idylls of Keir Hardie.'<sup>13</sup> It has been shown however that 'the new unions, their rules and their officers were on the side of moderation from their inception.'<sup>14</sup> Matthews sites examples of new union leaders' advocacy of conciliation and arbitration and their support of employers' need to discipline their members. It was the rank and file which forced strikes on a usually reluctant leadership 'Thorne and Tillett might take the lead in a strike and talk aggressively but this only served to obscure the origins of the militancy.'<sup>15</sup> More often than not union officials were looking for ways to call off strikes to preserve funds and safeguard their own livelihoods 'the leadership had plenty of past evidence that if the union collapsed they could easily end up back in the retorthouses or at the dock gates.'<sup>16</sup>

New union leaders' contribution to rank and file militancy was not syndicalism. To consolidate the organisation and their leadership of the new unions leaders such as Mann and Tillett opportunistically

employed the rhetoric and applied some of the strategies and tactics, notably the critique of 'pure and simple trade unionism' and the concept of the general strike from industrial unionism and syndicalism respectively. This caught the imagination of key sections of the working class and when superimposed on the existing structure of British trade unionism, against a background of mounting working class discontent and disillusionment with established trade unionism, this was to prove a heady mixture which was to threaten the trade union leaders themselves, established trade unionism and the state in Britain.

Contemporary analysts have generally regarded industrial unionism as a variant of syndicalism and much of the existing literature fails to make any distinction between them.<sup>17</sup> A notable exception to this rule among modern writers on the labour movement in Britain is the work of Hinton<sup>18</sup> who acknowledges that syndicalism and industrial unionism were separate movements and paves the way for a clearer understanding of industrial conflict in the period after 1910. This confusion is longstanding and has its roots in Tom Mann's approach to working class action in Britain in the early 20th century which not only failed to distinguish the two movements but actually propagated a confusion of terms inasmuch as he would refer to his position interchangeably as syndicalist, industrial unionist and industrial syndicalist.



The rest of this chapter will set out the origins, theory, aims and methods of syndicalism and industrial unionism respectively and chart their progress in Britain up to the 'Great Unrest' in 1910. Its aim is to provide a background for understanding the tactics and strategies adopted by workers and the state's deliberations on industrial unrest in the period.

### **Syndicalism**

The word 'syndicalism' has traditionally provoked strong sentiments among labour movement watchers but at the movement's height in the decade before World War 1, it engendered widespread fear and criticism across continents and was seen as a "new red spectre" with a menacing and subversive programme, 'Rarely has a movement aroused such universal agitation, awakened such world wide discussions and called forth such expressions of alarm as this one, that seemed suddenly to spring from the depths of the underworld fully armed and ready to do battle.'<sup>19</sup>

In France before 1895 syndicalism meant trade unionism and the French 'syndicats' (or unions) were merely associations of skilled workers who combined in pursuit of higher wages and shorter working hours. Revolutionary syndicalism - the movement which is widely seen as the engine of unrest throughout parts of

Europe before World War 1 - emerged in France in the 1880s with the passing of the Waldeck Rousseau law in 1884 which granted legal freedom to the formation of unions. This law was part of a government policy aimed at encouraging moderate trade unions and industrial conciliation and discouraging militant action.

The body of ideas known as Revolutionary Syndicalism was made explicit at the Amiens Congress of the Confederation Generale du Travail in 1906 in the famous Charter of Amiens. This Charter laid down that the CGT brought together, independent of all political schools of thought, 'all workers who are conscious of the need to struggle for the abolition of the wage system.' This declaration involved 'a recognition of the class struggle, which on an economic foundation, puts the workers in revolt against every form of exploitation and oppression, material and moral, that is operated by the capitalist class against the working class'.<sup>20</sup> Moss<sup>21</sup> notes that the Charter also recognised that the class struggle had both a reformist and a revolutionary character viz. 'In its day to day demands, syndicalism seeks the coordination of workers' efforts, the enhancement of workers' well being through the achievement of such immediate reforms as the shortening of hours and the raising of wages. This effort, however is only one aspect of the work of syndicalism. It prepares for complete emancipation, which can only be achieved by expropriating the capitalist class. It

advocates the general strike as the means of action to that end and holds that the union which is today the instrument of resistance, will in future be the unit of production and distribution, the basis of social reorganisation.<sup>22</sup>

Syndicalism did not seek to refashion the state and so rejected political action. In this view the state was the tool used by capitalists to exploit workers and had to be destroyed. Struggle on a political level was useless since all political parties were a fraud and 'Parliament was a sink of jobbery, corruption and compromise. The Socialists were no better than the rest, perhaps worse. Claiming to represent labour they diverted workers from the real issues and dropped their cause after they had arrived through their votes ... only the workers own action could emancipate them.'<sup>23</sup> In any case as there was to be no state in the new society there was no need to try and control it in the present one, the point was to undermine it.

As a doctrine Revolutionary Syndicalism was based on the idea of class struggle - the idea that society is divided into two classes - employers and workers. The former own the means of production and the latter own nothing but sell their labour power to survive. The struggle between the two classes is a creative force which will ultimately emancipate the workers because class struggle itself promotes workers' awareness of

themselves as an exploited class. Syndicalism aims to assist this process by organising workers into trade unions since organisation on this basis is the most fundamental and permanent of all human groupings based as it is on the one interest common to all - the satisfaction of economic needs - which transcends all others. Organisation on this basis promotes solidarity and encourages class consciousness.

The union is also the instrument of direct struggle with employers - it enables workers to mount "Direct Action" against employers. Direct action is action taken by workers without external intervention and is 'the manifestation of the consciousness and of the will of the working men themselves.'<sup>24</sup> Various activities constituted direct action in syndicalist terms.

Syndicalist leaders saw every act, every union campaign to achieve any economic gain as a successful battle in the class war - sabotage, strikes, boycotts and using the label; agitation for the regulation of apprentices, support for minimum wages, shorter hours, the enforcement of health and safety legislation, equal pay, suppression of piecework or work in convents, prisons and military garrisons and propaganda. These were activities syndicalists believed, which weakened capitalism, benefitted workers materially and psychologically and produced solidarity. But the ultimate form of direct action - the *raison d'être* of syndicalism - was the general strike through which the

new society would be achieved. Syndicalists believed that labour alone was absolutely necessary to production such that when the workers decided to withdraw their labour all of society including employers and the state would be forced to capitulate. There was, however, no clear idea of the form the general strike might take - some saw a general strike as short, decisive and probably violent, others saw it as a peaceful 'strike of folded arms',<sup>25</sup> and yet others understood it as a general strike in a single trade or industry or a local general strike of all trades.<sup>26</sup>

"Syndicalism" appeared in Britain in 1910 under the sponsorship of Tom Mann, erstwhile member of the early Social Democratic Federation, veteran of the 1889 Dock strike, leader of the Transport Workers' Federation and formerly of the Independent Labour Party. Mann had spent the previous eight years in Australia and New Zealand where he had been active in the labour movement. Mann's involvement in industrial conflict in Australia had led him to conclude 'that the present system of sectional trades unionism is incapable of effectively combatting the capitalist system under which the civilised world is now suffering, and such modifications and alterations should be made in the existing unions as will admit of a genuine federation of all organisations with power to act unitedly for industrial purposes.'<sup>27</sup>

On his return to Britain in May 1910, Mann declared his intention to advocate "Industrial Unionism" owing to the weakness and sectional character of the existing trade union movement and stressed the importance of industrial organisation over political action. However he emphasised that he did not aim to destroy or disrupt the trade union movement but to improve it. Soon after this Mann and Guy Bowman (journalist, translator and leading light of the Social Democratic Federation) left for Paris to investigate the workings of the CGT. Mann was so impressed with the "French Policy" that on his return to England he produced the first issue of the "Industrial Syndicalist" (in partnership with Bowman) in which he compared the aims and methods of the American Industrial Workers of the World and the French Confederation Generale de Travail and found the former wanting.<sup>28</sup>

Industrial unionist George Harvey, at the time the editor of the organ of the Socialist Labour Party, "The Socialist", was concerned to correct the confusions instigated by Mann and propagated by the capitalist press "few people are clear on the distinction between Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism. Furthermore, the Syndicalists themselves were rather mixed up and aided the capitalist press to confuse the issue for one month they called themselves "Syndicalists" and another month "Industrial Unionists."<sup>29</sup> Harvey further highlighted the confusion of labour leaders by citing Philip

Snowden's attack on Industrial Unionism in the "Weekly Record" of 1910 where he wrongly stated that industrial unionists obtained their ideas from America but the movement originated in France and was an anarchist movement of which Tom Mann was an exponent. Similarly Ramsay Macdonald, both in the press and in "Socialism and Society"<sup>30</sup> maintained that industrial unionism was American syndicalism and British syndicalism was the result of industrial unionist propaganda.

#### **Industrial Unionism**

Industrial Unionism was the child of Daniel De Leon a convert to Marxism, who went to the USA from Curacao in 1872 to study at Columbia law school where he later taught. Four years after the headquarters of the First International were moved to New York in 1872, it was dissolved at the Congress of Philadelphia in 1876 and was reconstituted as the Socialist Labour Party by the largely German immigrant members of the defunct International. This was the first Socialist party to be established in America and until 1890 when Daniel DeLeon joined the SLP it had remained a negligible force in the American labour movement. Under DeLeon's influence the SLP blossomed. In 1891 he stood as SLP candidate for governor of New York state, was elected editor of the SLP organ "The Weekly People" and began a campaign to inject "socialist discipline" into the party by expelling middle class reformers and turning

their newspaper from a source of entertainment and rallying point for German emigres into a propaganda weapon. At this time the SLP was influential in seventy two trade unions united in the New York Central Labour Federation and had members in both the Knights of Labour and the American Federation of Labour but despite widespread membership support the SLP was unable to influence the policy of these unions or to persuade trade union leaders to adopt a socialist programme which would have committed them to struggle for the collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.<sup>31</sup>

The two most prominent unions in America in this period were the powerful American Federation of Labour under the leadership of Samuel Gompers and the less successful Knights of Labour (in terms of membership). The AFL in particular saw its role as defender of the skilled against the threat from the less skilled, from women, from black workers and from immigrant labour and sought and received employers support in this endeavour. Under Gompers' leadership the AFL opposed old age pensions, health insurance, unemployment benefit and 'uncritically supported the domestic and foreign policy of successive governments' on the ground that its business was 'trade unionism pure and simple and not politics.'<sup>32</sup>



Repeated failures to initiate fundamental changes within existing trade unions led DeLeon to conclude that struggle within them was pointless because they were controlled by the "labour lieutenants of capital" they were "the limbs of capitalism" and 'a belated reproduction of the old guild system' which 'deserves no quarter at the socialist's hands.'<sup>33</sup>

DeLeon called his theory Industrial Unionism or Industrialism. <sup>34</sup> The aim of the movement was to organise a class union not a trade union, not a loose affiliation of class unions but one union under one constitution composed of industrial departments to include the many and closely related grades of labour. The object of this industrial organisation was to enable the working class as a class to take control of and hold as their own collective property, all the means of production and to constitute the organisation of the "Socialist Republic" of which the central directing authority was to be a Parliament of Industry composed of the representatives of various departments of production elected from below.<sup>35</sup>

Seretan <sup>36</sup> has highlighted some analysts failure to distinguish DeLeon's doctrine of industrial unionism from the generic term 'industrial unionism' pointing out that this has traditionally been a source of confusion about the movement.

For DeLeon, industrial unionism was the path for true socialists to follow. Unions should be set up which would unite the entire working class organised by industry and 'not merely for those for whom there are jobs...not only those who can pay dues.'<sup>37</sup> Industrial unions would ensure that the worker would be ready to assume and conduct production 'the moment the guns of the public powers fall into his hands.' This would be achieved through the votes of informed workers who would elect SLP members to the state so that at the moment of revolution, the armed forces of the state could not be turned against them". The workers' representatives in the state would then 'adjourn sine die'<sup>38</sup> because 'the industrial organisation forecasts the future constituencies of the parliaments of the Socialist Republic.'<sup>39</sup> DeLeon was not, however, against representative government - on the contrary he argued that 'when groups are so large that they cannot meet in public assembly and decide things, representative government becomes a necessity, a useful thing and a good thing.'<sup>40</sup> As to political action he urged 'make no mistake: the working class must both be economic and political. The capitalist is organised on both lines, you must attack him on both.'<sup>41</sup> For DeLeon the political movement made 'the masses accessible to the propaganda of Labour' and 'raised the labour movement above the category of a conspiracy.'<sup>42</sup>

DeLeon argued that political organisation was imperative to facilitate the work of the industrial organisation because the present function of the state is to defend the interests of the ruling class and the workers can only disarm the capitalist class by taking the state out of its grasp. The function of the state was originally to raise the level of production to a degree which would allow abundance for all. This stage had been reached and passed but the political state had been retained beyond its political utility not in the interests of the people but to protect the interests of the capitalist class by holding down the working class - it is 'a means of suppression, of oppression, of tyranny.'<sup>43</sup> Once the means of production were communally owned the state would reassume its beneficent functions of aiding and assisting in production. A state or central directing authority is necessary because 'the nature of the machinery of production, the subdivision of labour which aids cooperation and which cooperation fosters, and which is necessary to the plentifulness of production that civilisation requires, compel a harmonious working together of all departments of labor and thence compel the establishment of a central directing authority.'<sup>44</sup>

DeLeon understood workers' desire for reform but argued that "steps in the right direction", so-called "immediate demands" are among the most precarious ... 'Request a little when you have a right to the whole,

and your request, whatever declamatory rhetoric or abstract scientific verbiage it be accompanied with, works a subscription to the principle that wrongs you ... the palliative works the evil of inoculating the Revolutionary force with a fundamental misconception of the nature of the foe it has to deal with. It proceeds from the theory that the capitalist class will allow itself to be 'pared off' to death - a fatal illusion. The tiger of capitalism will protect its superfluities with the same ferocity that it will protect its very existence. Nothing is gained on the road of palliatives, all may be lost.'<sup>45</sup>

DeLeon did not invest the industrial union with any more power to increase real wages than the craft union. The main weapon of the industrial union as of the craft union was the strike and although he tolerated strikes in the IWW, he was scathing of the strike's revolutionary potential 'the strike against an employer ... is not a method of revolution, it is a method of warfare within existing conditions. It is more, it is in the nature of a declaration of loyalty to the system in force. The workingman who goes out on strike does first of all leave in the hands of the capitalist the plant of production. By that mere fact he admits that the employer is the rightful owner, at least as much is implied. The revolutionary act of the working class will not be a strike.'<sup>46</sup>

DeLeon proposed a 'general lockout of the capitalist class' and not a general strike. 'The general lockout proceeds from the correct premises that the land and the fulness thereof are labour's and so proceeding it starts with possession. It thus safeguards the revolution against being starved out.' DeLeon further distanced Industrial Unionism from syndicalism saying he had no sympathy with 'men who talk dynamite, bombs, blood and thunder.'<sup>47</sup>

The Socialist Labour Party emerged in Britain in 1903 after George Yates, a member of the Scottish SDF, became disillusioned with the increasing reformism of the Second International and the SDF and set out to build a new party composed of like-minded people and to publish a paper expressing their views in opposition to "Justice", the organ of the SDF. Yates received the support of James Connolly, the leader of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, who joined him from Ireland in 1901. The British SLP faithfully reflected DeLeon's beliefs, some members corresponded with Daniel DeLeon and the SLP distributed his writings in Scotland.<sup>48</sup> .

In the event the only aspect of DeLeon's message which gained a firm foothold among British workers was its critique of moderate trade unionism. By 1910 there was a ready made constituency for the view that the structure and leadership of the established trade unions were inconsistent with their members' interests.

### Summary

It can be seen from the above that syndicalism and industrial unionism were two separate movements which differed on every key issue except for the need to overthrow capitalism. These movements had distinct theoretical origins, they differed on the relative value and usefulness of political and industrial action, on the use of violence, on the general strike, trade unionism, the question of reform under capitalism and on the need for a state or central directing authority in the new society.

Worker organisation in Britain in the period 1910-21 was influenced by both of these movements as this study will show. However trade union leaders such as Tom Mann and Jack Murphy superimposed some of the strategies and tactics of these movements on the traditions and models of organisation of the craft societies. They did not envisage revolution. Their 'innovations lay in the field of industrial tactics, not of political strategy as such.'<sup>49</sup>

- 1 Turner 1962.
- 2 Phelps-Brown 1960.
- 3 London Union of Compositors quoted in Clegg 1964 p5.
- 4 Ibid p7.
- 5 Ibid p9.
- 6 Phelps-Brown 1960 pp15,16. Clegg 1964 p15.
- 7 Phelps-Brown 1960 pp120,121,122.
- 8 Clegg 1964.
- 9 Ibid p92.
- 10 Matthews 1991 p27.
- 11 Clegg 1964 p91.
- 12 Cole 1948 p103. See also Hobsbawm 1964.
- 13 Phelps-Brown 1960 p320. Clegg 1964.
- 14 Matthews 1991 p28.
- 15 Ibid pp28,29,30.
- 16 Ibid p32.
- 17 Horvat 1975. Holton 1976. Foote 1985.
- 18 Hinton 1973.
- 19 Hunter 1969.
- 20 Cole 1954 p337.
- 21 Moss 1976 pp144,154.
- 22 Lorwin 1954 p27.
- 23 Ibid pp30,31.
- 24 Levine 1912.
- 25 Ibid
- 26 Mitchell 1987.
- 27 Brown 1974.
- 28 The Industrial Syndicalist Vol 1 No 1 July 1910.

- 29 Harvey 1917.
- 30 MacDonald, 1907.
- 31 Kipnis 1952.
- 32 Desmond Greaves 1976 p.172.
- 33 DeLeon 1904.
- 34 DeLeon 1909.
- 35 The Socialist October 1910.
- 36 Seretan 1979 p.182.
- 37 Ibid p19.
- 38 DeLeon 1905 pp.23,24.
- 39 DeLeon ND p19.BQTU
- 40 Proceedings of the Socialist Labour Party New York  
1901.
- 41 DeLeon 1896.
- 42 Young 1976.
- 43 DeLeon 1896 p6.
- 44 Ibid p7.
- 45 DeLeon ND P40.
- 46 Seretan 1979 p183.
- 47 DeLeon 1929 pp96,97.
- 48 Challinor 1977 p10.
- 49 Hinton 1978 p99.



## The State, Trade Unions and Industrial Conflict

### Introduction

This chapter sketches the historical development of the relationship between the state and trade unions in Britain and analyses the process by which the state came to promote and participate in conciliation with a view to reducing industrial conflict. It is not my intention to engage in abstract debate about the character of "the state".<sup>1</sup> However as Miliband notes <sup>2</sup> a 'theory of the state' underpins all political analysis. At the beginning of the thesis I emphasise that the fundamental relationship in capitalism is that between labour and capital. In this thesis the state is taken to be that set of institutions which politically regulates the terms of that relationship. Underpinning this approach is the view that the labour-capital relation is not just economic but also legal and political. Although it seems that exploitation in capitalism takes place purely through the buying and selling of labour power this economic relation is underpinned by property relations. Property relations are legal relations and the law is backed up by political power or force supplied by the state. This should not be taken to imply that the state is a

unified actor. On the contrary, as this thesis shows, the state is a set of heirarchical institutions with overlapping and contradictory objectives. My aim in this chapter is to uncover the understandings of industrial conflict, of trade unionism and of trade union officials on which state industrial relations policy rested in the period 1910-21. To this end I have concentrated on the first of a series of state agencies - the Labour Department of the Board of Trade - which were directly empowered to regulate the terms of the relationship between labour and capital. I will begin by outlining the development of the relationship between the state and trade unions in the last half of the 19th century and the part which the Labour Department of the Board of Trade and its policy of conciliation and arbitration came to play in this relationship. I will then focus on the most influential analyses of the determinants of state labour policy and the role of trade unions in the period up to and including the First World War.

### **Trade Unions and the State**

Trade unions and industrial conflict have been a long run feature of British society and throughout the state has regulated them by means of legislation.<sup>3</sup> Trade unions have occupied a central position in industrial relations policy since the last half of the nineteenth

century. In the first half of the 19th Century trade unions were illegal organisations although they persisted, especially among craft workers, either secretly or with the tacit acquiescence of employers. Although the Combination Acts were repealed in 1824 which allowed workers the right of free association and encouraged the spread of worker associations, prosecutions of trade unionists continued through the use of other laws so that associations and strikes concerned with issues other than wages and hours remained criminal conspiracies at common law. It was not until the Trade Union Act was passed in 1871 that trade unions were made legal and freed from prosecution for conspiracy in restraint of trade. The determinants of this change are outlined below.

#### **The Royal Commission on Trade Unions 1867.**

In 1867 the Royal Commission on Trade Unions was set up in response to the Sheffield outrages and 'The growing power and solidarity of the small trade union movement [which had] roused alarm among the governing classes.'<sup>4</sup> The Commission's brief was to inquire into allegations of intimidation and outrage which these unions were accused of encouraging, 'The practical problem before us is this: seeing that the bulk of the artizan population consider it in their interest to form themselves into these associations, in what way can they be rendered most conducive to public policy?'<sup>5</sup>

The Commission was expected by many employers to favour repression, but instead it discussed the merits of conciliation and arbitration and the Minority Report recommended giving unions legal recognition. The Commission noted the striking and steady increase of well organised and powerful trade unionism among skilled workers but recognised that this had gone hand in hand with improvements in their general character, compared with earlier inquiries, (1824,1825,1838.) and that violent incidents were a rarity. This type of trade unionism was not the problem, in the Commission's view, but trade unions which were badly organised and unrecognised and clung to the ways of the old secret trade unions. The latter did not provide benefits for their members and preserved the criminal features of the surreptitious unions under the old law.

(Combination Acts 1799,1800.)

Evidence brought before the Commission showed that the readiness to strike on the part of workers was not in itself due to trade unionism and that strike activity did not increase as the strength of a trade union increased. The reverse was true. Once trade unions established themselves strikes decreased and, instead of a bid to constantly increase wages, a regularity of wages and hours ensued. The strongest, richest and largest unions were in those trades which exhibited established wage rates and few disputes. For example,

unions in the engineering trade had a large membership and a large reserve fund but wages had remained static for twenty five years except when varied by employers. Similarly the shipwrights and printers unions exhibited the same characteristics.

In addition the evidence showed that trade unions were 'a benefit of immense public utility and must spare the community a heavy burden in the poor rates and infirmaries alone' since 'every fresh expansion of industry is accompanied by a vast train of destitution.' Unions offered sick benefits, accident benefits, funeral funds, superannuation and unemployment benefits. They kept a great body of workers out of pauperism by keeping records on the state of trade and by sending labour from places where work is scarce to where it was plentiful or assisting their emigration. Well organised trade unions like these were 'plainly useful both to capitalists and to the community '6.

It was noted that the best types of union owed their superior organisation to men like the Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers who 'must impress all who have the opportunity of knowing him as a man of ability and character.' <sup>7</sup> Of trade union officials generally it was noted 'We cannot suppose that the officials ... look on the acts of illegality and violence with any less feeling of abhorrence than we do

ourselves ... employers know of no case of violence .. which they could connect with the principal union officials,'<sup>8</sup>

Strikes were shown to be most frequent and the least orderly in the absence of any established union.

Examples were cited of strikes, lockouts, outrage and riots in the coal mining districts of South Wales and Derbyshire where no regular union was in force.

'Experience has shown how readily a body of men who are dissatisfied with their wages subscribe a small fund for the purpose of striking, and form a rude union which scarcely exists, or is intended to exist beyond the immediate occasion.'<sup>9</sup> Thus it was concluded that strikes and violence 'are ordinary incidents of the association of working men in masses' to which trade unionism of the kind referred to above 'brings an increased sense of order, subordination and reflection.'<sup>10</sup>

The evidence presented to the Commission also showed an increasing antagonism between employers and workers and increased organisation on both sides which had manifested itself in ever more violent episodes of industrial conflict. The employers complained that the advent of unionism had fostered this spirit of antagonism. They had lost control over their employees. It was agreed that the time when employers 'were regarded by both law and usage as the governing class

is now greatly relaxed, and cannot be revived, a substitute has now to be found for it.<sup>11</sup> Employers' claim that violence and industrial conflict was caused by workers' determination to remain outside unions was rejected. No workers had come forward to substantiate this claim. 'This may be interpreted, either as implying that the labouring classes in general are not discontented with the restrictions that trades unions appear to impose on industry or as implying that the influence of those unions is so very extensive, their ramifications so minute, and the general dislike to oppose an established class feeling so strong, that the real sentiments of the workmen opposed to unions have been, to a great extent, withheld from us.'<sup>12</sup> The Commission did not accept the latter implication and concluded that this was a small element in industrial unrest, that only a very small minority of workers wanted to remain outside trade unions and that this was probably due to the influence of outside agencies such as the Free Labour Registration Society (a body organised by employers for the express purpose of counteracting trade unions). Many strikers were wage labourers struggling for subsistence who saw unionism as a way forward. The biggest obstacles to this and a major cause of unrest were, in the Commission's view, the oppressive practices of employers and the legal containment of trade unions.

It was concluded that all the disadvantages of trade unionism, as far as employers and the community were concerned, disappeared when they reached a high degree of organisation and a 'well recognised code of general rules exists, with a competent authority to maintain and explain them. The element of due notice before a change on either side, alone effects the greatest results in removing sources of dispute. The difference between one state of things and the other appears to us to be that between a morbid and a healthy state of industrial relations' ... 'When the great advantages of the system of a code of rules and prices is further supported by a board of arbitration, it appears to us the nearest solution of the labour and employment question which has yet shown itself.'<sup>13</sup>

It was the Royal Commission's conclusion that conciliation and arbitration boards offered 'a remedy [for industrial conflict] at once speedy, safe and simple'<sup>14</sup>. It was recognised that the success of this remedy depended on the promotion of trade unionism of the type described at length in its report. This type of worker organisation - 'responsible' trade unionism - was the solution to the older and more typical form of worker organisation which was often accompanied by strikes and violence. Responsible trade unionism was seen as a discipline on these natural tendencies of workers and a substitute for employers loss of direct control over them.



The legislative outcome of the Commission's deliberations was the Trade Union Act 1871 which accorded permanent recognition to trade unions by declaring that a trade union was no longer to be considered unlawful because its objects were in restraint of trade. Flanders <sup>15</sup> notes that the definition of trade unions in this Act was 'any combination, (including employers' associations) whether temporary or permanent, the principal objects of which are under its constitution, the regulation of the relations between workmen and masters or between workmen and workmen or between masters and masters, or the imposing of restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business and also the provision of benefits to members.' It should be emphasised, however, that although these Acts established trade unions on firm social and legal foundations 'the foundations ... were still extremely narrow, and equally narrow was the prevailing conception of their tasks.'<sup>16</sup>

The Trade Union Act 1871 aimed to provide a status and role for the trade unions. The legislation had two important effects. On the one hand, it entitled a recognised union to bargain collectively with the employer concerned. On the other hand it denied the right to bargain collectively to unions which were not recognised by employers. It thereby imposed legal restraints on rank and file activity. Also as Hyman<sup>17</sup>

emphasises, this allowed employers to determine the scope of collective bargaining. An employer would naturally favour a union which had no inclination to challenge seriously the right of management to control production. Even without such selectivity, the terms on which an employer recognised a union could include restrictions on its right to pursue certain issues in negotiation. And even where no explicit restrictions existed, union representatives would not normally present demands which jeopardised the bargaining relationship. This legislation therefore aimed to create an environment which favoured the expansion of 'responsible' trade unions led by officials with authority over their members with whom employers could negotiate so that industrial conflict could be contained.

#### **Conciliation and Arbitration**

Conciliation is a practice which involves the services of a neutral third party in a dispute as a means of helping the disputing parties to arrive at an amicable settlement or agreed solution. The responsibility for settling disputes rests with the parties themselves. Arbitration is a procedure whereby a third party, not acting as a court of law, is empowered to take a decision which disposes of the dispute.<sup>18</sup> Conciliation

and arbitration as ways of resolving disputes between employers and workers were pioneered in the hosiery industry in the 1860s. The increase in popularity of conciliation and arbitration between employers and workers in the last quarter of the 19th century was interpreted at the time as a sea change in industrial relations such that 'confidence and good will have replaced suspicion and open hostility.'<sup>19</sup> Later it was characterised as 'an evolutionary triumph of liberal principles and civilised restraints, with workers coming gradually to "learn" what was required of them in this best of all liberal worlds. Organised labour after a turbulent and irrational period, grasped the wisdom of rational peaceful negotiation and fashioned systems which took their place in the emerging panoply of civilised institutions, with alternative strategies deservedly sinking down into the dustbin of history as pathetic and doomed digressions.'<sup>20</sup> While noting that the use of conciliation and arbitration marked an important development in industrial relations, contemporary writers have been less effusive or unanimous in their assessments of them.

Although workers achieved some concessions and worker organisation was strengthened by the existence of joint procedures for settling disputes (acceptance of joint boards was a condition for survival of trade unionism<sup>21</sup>) it is clear that in terms of wages employers had most to gain from them.<sup>22</sup> Phelps Brown

argues that two factors explain employers participation in conciliation and arbitration at this time, the growing strength of worker organisation and employers' interest in standardising wages as this removed one element in competition. Phelps Brown <sup>23</sup> clarifies, 'The unionists were at least strong enough to bring a number of mills out together, and would go back only when a common settlement had been made for them all. If the employers had begun by feeling that the wider the combination was, the greater the threat to them, they soon found it was really the other way round: except where they were pinned down by foreign competition they might have little to fear from a wage settlement if only it was enforced on all of them alike, and a strong union was their guarantee that it would be. Not a few reached the conclusion that it was a positive advantage to them to have a floor put under price competition in this way. Those who had little love for the union were still willing to meet it to negotiate a rate, because of all union activities this interfered with them least. They would resent hotly any encroachment on their prerogatives as managers of their own businesses, but collective bargaining only meant that they were paying the same price as their competitors for one factor of production, just as they did when they bought a raw material in the same market.'

Porter shows how conciliation and arbitration procedures were weighted in favour of employers.

Arbitration was used more than conciliation in the 1870s because it circumvented the issue of recognition and placed the onus of deciding claims on arbitrators. The majority of arbitrators were lawyers, politicians and employers who shared the conventional view of political economy. This, combined with union leaders willingness to negotiate 'placed a definite restriction on the possibility of any considerable change in the workers' position.'<sup>24</sup>

For example, the criteria most often used by arbitrators for determining awards favoured employers and included the general state of trade, the competitive needs of a district and changes in the selling price of the product. The first of these offers no precise criterion - 'what the trade is and what it can bear are relative matters, to be determined only after taking into account a large number of factors ... A great deal depends on obtaining figures from employers on which to base a judgement. As a general rule employers have been extremely reluctant to supply this evidence, and when it has been furnished it has been too fragmentary to be of much use.'<sup>25</sup> The second standard could mean that no district ever got a wage advance.<sup>26</sup> It was nevertheless often used by arbitrators. The most popular criterion was changes in the selling price of the product. Influential arbitrator Rupert Kettle asserted in 1869 that 'price forms the only legitimate fund out of which wages can

be paid, and the enquiry should be strictly confined to this.'<sup>27</sup> Few arbitrators considered profits as a standard for wage awards, sharing the employers' view that profits were no concern of the workers. Few recognised the question of a subsistence level and where arbitrators did recognise this standard, 'it was usually sacrificed to their need to make an award reflecting the change in the state of trade.'<sup>28</sup>

Arbitration as a method of settling wage disputes was at its height in the 1870s during the Great Depression. After 1879 the number of wage disputes taken to arbitration began to decline sharply due to trade union members' disenchantment. In the period 1873 -1896 few arbitration awards gave wage increases - most were either reductions or rejections of claims for increases. In the industries analysed by Porter <sup>29</sup> in this period - the hosiery and lace trades, boot and shoe, cotton spinning, iron and coal mining - arbitration awards showed a correspondence to the trend of average industrial prices and to short run changes in the level of economic activity. He finds only two instances of wage increases and twenty eight reductions. Product prices were the main information provided by employers. Arbitrators were forced to accept these and, since the main feature of the Great Depression was the fall in prices, award wage reductions. In addition, where other criteria were used such as changes in output, these were based on a

comparison of the present level of activity with that of a previous year and since the majority of awards in the Great Depression took place against a background of temporarily declining economic activity, the pressure to reduce wages was reinforced.

Since it seemed invariably to correspond with wage reductions, trade union members became disillusioned with arbitration and there was a shift away from arbitration towards conciliation in the coal, iron, cotton, hosiery and lace trades. Trade union leaders became enthusiastic supporters of conciliation boards and pointed to the gains made through them not least the reduction of strikes.<sup>30</sup> However there was a growing belief among union members that their leaders had become too willing to compromise their interests to preserve conciliation machinery and this discontent began to be expressed in unofficial action resulting in several conciliation boards being broken during and after the Great Depression.<sup>31</sup> This action grew as the restraints imposed upon trade unions' bargaining power in prosperous periods became more obvious especially during years when the cost of living increased.

Both Porter<sup>32</sup> and Burgess<sup>33</sup> find that trade union leaders imposed conciliation and arbitration on their members because it consolidated their relatively privileged position and that this contributed to a growing split between officials and their members

making the unofficial dispute a characteristic aspect of British industrial relations. Unofficial action grew as the restraints imposed upon trade unions' bargaining power in prosperous periods became more obvious especially during years when the cost of living increased.

A major restriction characteristic of agreements reached through joint procedures was the length of agreements negotiated by union leaders which prevented workers taking advantage of prosperous trade to press for wage increases. By negotiating long term agreements as trade was increasing, employers could keep wages down as profits were rising and production was less likely to be disrupted by disputes. Long agreements also prevented local union branches from making wage claims so that for militant local unionists, union discipline was as important as employer opposition.

In addition conciliation machinery required a period of notice after the expiry of agreements before a claim could be made. The Nottingham Hosiery Board required one month's notice while most sliding scale agreements provided for two or three months notice. This prevented employers from being caught in the middle of an order. There were also restrictions on the size of wage rate fluctuations at any one time or within a certain time e.g. 5% at any one time or within five years.



In some industries employers placed restrictions on what could be discussed on conciliation boards. For example the terms which followed the Boot and Shoe lockout in 1895 (negotiated with the assistance of the BOT) restricted the work of the boards to the interpretation of existing agreements to prevent the discussion of 'abstract principles of socialism.' The employers' chairman described the terms as 'a charter of rights for the manufacturers, under which three fourths of the disputes which affected the industry would be rendered impossible.'<sup>34</sup>

Procedural delays involved in making a claim through conciliation machinery also constituted a barrier to effective action. For workers, who were obliged not to strike while their claims were being processed, this could mean a wait of months or even years as in the case of the "abnormal places" dispute in South Wales.<sup>35</sup>

The restrictive effects of conciliation agreements on workers' wages in a boom were not matched by equivalent restrictions on employers when their relative power was greatest in a depression. For instance in the coal mining districts of the Federated Area and South Wales where a conciliation agreement (which was virtually a sliding scale with a maximum and minimum rate) operated after 1894 and 1903 respectively. The divergence between the level of wage rates when these rates reached the maximum permitted by the agreement was

greater than the divergence between the level of prices and wage rates in a depression when the minimum rate was in operation.<sup>36</sup>

It can be seen from this that in practice conciliation and arbitration operated to improve the position of employers and trade unions rather than workers' position in industrial bargaining. As we have seen it was this effect of conciliation and arbitration together with its beneficial effect on strike activity which was applauded by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions when it concluded that responsible trade unionism and conciliation and arbitration were 'the nearest solution of the labour and employment question which has yet shown itself',<sup>37</sup>. The establishment of numerous boards of conciliation and arbitration in the 1870s were similarly credited by the BOT with 'the relative moderation in the demand of the workmen for a share in the profits of the extraordinary trade expansion then in progress.'<sup>38</sup> However the Royal Commission's hopes for responsible trade unionism and conciliation and arbitration soon began to founder. A range of legislation had been passed to encourage conciliation and arbitration. The Councils of Conciliation Act was passed in 1867 to promote the setting up of councils of conciliation where employers and workers' representatives could meet to thrash out voluntary agreements which would then be legally enforceable. This legislation had failed to be

effective for a variety of reasons but chiefly because, like the Arbitration Act 1824, it was inconsistent with trade unions desire, borne of their experience at the hands of the law, <sup>39</sup> to free themselves from legal constraints, it ruled out determination of wage rates when the majority of disputes concerned wages questions and because the success of conciliation depended on a much higher level of organisation and recognition of trade unions than was in existence at the time except in a few well established and organised trades.

In 1872 AJ Mundella (hosiery manufacturer, MP and later President of the BOT) succeeded in passing the Arbitration (Masters and Workmen) Act to try and encourage the trend towards arbitration. This Act provided for agreements drawn up between employers and workers as a result of conciliation or arbitration to be made binding on both. It facilitated compulsory arbitration but was weaker than previous legislation in that it was necessary for both parties to agree. A decision could not be imposed on either party. The Act failed for much the same reasons as its predecessors but for Sharp<sup>40</sup>, it is interesting' as a last attempt to devise a universally applicable means of settling disputes with a legal sanction ... the state ceased for the time being to attempt to legislate for the settlement of industrial strikes and left industry to find its own panacea.' It will become clear below however that 'the state ... has never stood passively

by to let the contending parties get on with it as they will' and escalating industrial conflict led to another Royal Commission.<sup>41</sup>

#### The Royal Commission on Labour

The Royal Commission on Labour was set up in 1891 in response to an unprecedented increase in trade union activity and a period of widespread friction and dispute. In 1889 and 1890 alone there were 1,145 and 1,028 strikes respectively.<sup>42</sup> The Commission noted that the initiatives taken by the Royal Commission of 1867-69 had been based on the idea that well organised and responsible trade unions and employers organisations were the key to improved industrial relations. The latter had worsened significantly in the intervening period after a promising start and the Commission concluded that this deterioration was the outcome of various factors.

Firstly it was noted that the expansion of responsible trade union organisation as described by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions had been smaller than envisaged. This owed much to the fact that many employers still endeavoured to employ workers who were not organised. Secondly that the power and constitution of trade unions had an important influence on the

character of industrial relations. For the most part power was still with the rank and file in trade unions and not with the executives. It was emphasised that in some cases, such as that of the Durham coalminers, so many references had to be made in the case of general questions to the local lodges or branches, to be decided by ballot, that the central body were little more than delegates acting under immediate instructions and had to refer points to their constituents even in the midst of negotiations with employers.

In other cases, especially where a trade was scattered in various branches all over the country and through districts differing widely in local circumstances from each other, much power and discretion was frequently left with the district or executive committees or local branches. The only power the central executive of most unions of this kind seemed to have was the power of withholding funds if strike action was taken by a local branch or district and this power was seldom exercised.<sup>43</sup>

The ideal trade union from the Commission's point of view was characterised by 'such a proportion of men in a trade as will give it controlling power in the trade and enable it to treat with employers as representative of the whole and to make agreements and decisions binding on the whole trade. It will have a strong executive council, thoroughly representative of the

members and implicitly trusted by them. This machinery will enable the society to negotiate with employers with the least possible friction, either from time to time, or by way of a permanent joint board for the purpose of settling hour and wage rate questions and other points of dispute and to give undertakings and enter into agreements on which employers can rely.<sup>44</sup> Some trade unions came near to this ideal but these were mostly in skilled trades which were more adapted to organisation (it was easier to convert the natural craft already in existence into a formal and permanent trade union) or in other less skilled trades where the monopoly possessed by an industry and its consequent facilities for organisation were more developed due to extraneous causes e.g. legislation. Coal mining was cited as a good example of this. The natural monopoly which, in some trades, was due to workers special skill had been obtained by coalminers not only because the industry was concentrated in certain districts and they had practical possession of the villages adjacent to which they worked, but through the provisions of the Coal Mines Regulation Act 1887 which rendered it impossible for employers to bring in new men, in case of a strike, to take the place of the strikers.

Thirdly there were serious deficiencies in organisation among employers. Employers' organisations tended to be formed in response to the growing strength of workers organisations. They were forced to combine to resist

them. There were some longstanding employers associations originally formed to watch legislation affecting trade or for tempering competition by agreement among themselves which had become instruments of mutual protection against worker organisation. Generally, however, employers combined unwillingly and competition between them usually ensured that their combinations were shortlived. Many employers did not join employers associations.

The findings of the Royal Commission are in accord with the view that this traditional structure of authority relationships began to be challenged once industrial relations were formalised and that conciliation boards played a key role in this process by separating the rank and file from their traditional control over negotiations so that the traditional flow of union authority from below could be reversed and disputes could be subject to executive control. 'It was the unions who were participating in any power sharing that was involved but it was a power that was to be exercised over the men. Of course the system depended on a union authority that was viable and effective, but the system also worked to enhance and legitimise that authority.'<sup>45</sup> Price is concerned to emphasise that this should not be taken to mean that union officials consciously sold out their members, on the contrary, from their point of view conciliation offered many advantages to their members.

Price's view is however qualified by the fact that the Commission <sup>46</sup> was equally concerned with the substantial rise in the numerical representation and importance of organisation among unskilled labour since the reports of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions. The organisation of the previously powerless, who saw in trade unionism and conciliation and arbitration the way to address their powerlessness, had caused new difficulties. Unskilled organisations were usually weak. They rapidly arose, enrolled many members and rapidly declined. Their members had no natural monopoly over their work as in the skilled trades and employers could easily replace them. They relied solely on strike action to achieve their aims. The unskilled unions' prosperity and numerical strength depended on success in conflicts. When strike action was unsuccessful they lost many members because they could not offer the benefits which provided solidity and permanence to the established trade unions. Their low paid members could afford only small subscriptions.

In spite of these weaknesses however, the unskilled unions had become a source of concern for the state for several reasons. Firstly, unskilled union members tended to use violence to prevent non union labour taking the place of locked out unionists. Secondly, they sought the support of unskilled labour in other trades, other trade unions and the state in industrial



conflicts. Thirdly, large schemes of amalgamation and federation had appeared with the intention of achieving sympathy strikes. This had extended the range and damage caused by industrial conflict. Finally the growth of organisations with membership extending outside of a single establishment across an entire industry had loosened the control of employers over their workforce in individual firms. It was noted that attempts had been made to counteract this by profit sharing schemes, mutual benefit and accident funds to 'reproduce the old fashioned sentiment of unity only on a basis of more equal relations suited to the altered spirit of the time' and to make firms 'independent industrial polities constituted on the footing of partnership' but the established trade unions had seen these initiatives as an attack on them and resisted them.<sup>47</sup> It was noted that many recent conflicts in the ranks of unskilled labour had been aimed at compelling employers to recognise their organisations. Employers, however, saw no need to recognise them and totally resisted their attempts - they were easily replaced by non union labour and labour imported from country districts. This was causing great bitterness and violence.

#### **A New Departure in Industrial Relations**

As a result of the Commission's deliberations the Conciliation Act 1896 was passed which repealed the Arbitration Act 1824, the Councils of Conciliation Act 1867 and the Arbitration Act 1872 and gave statutory authority to Labour Department of the BOT to act as state conciliator. It was empowered to intervene in industrial disputes by the provision that it should 'take such steps as to the Board may seem expedient for the purpose of enabling the parties to the difference to meet together.'<sup>48</sup>

Before 1896 intervention in trade disputes was not formally included in the BOT's functions although it had intervened and undertook conciliation procedures informally with a view to the settlement of strikes or lockouts which were either imminent or in progress - they were a method of settling disputes not of preventing them. It also collected, digested and published statistical information bearing on questions relating to the conditions of labour.<sup>49</sup>

After the Conciliation Act, conciliation came to mean much more than a practice involving the services of a neutral third party in a dispute to help the parties reach an amicable settlement. The aim of conciliation came to include intervention by the BOT to actively foster the growth of collective bargaining - to intervene permanently to prevent disputes from arising. Since disputes provided the occasion for strikes and

lockouts, it was concluded that they could be prevented from arising by making collective bargaining a more effective and widespread process. The Labour Department began to set up a dialogue with existing conciliation boards, to cooperate with them and to promote the setting up of new boards. Where the BOT was called upon to assist in the settlement of disputes, it embodied the settlement in the form of a collective agreement signed and issued by the state conciliator which included procedural arrangements to facilitate further agreements as well as a clause providing for the appointment of a state conciliator should the parties fail to reach a settlement by negotiation. The BOT gave itself the right to intervene.<sup>50</sup>

The practice of conciliation was now aimed at expediting the recognition of trade unionism through the imposition on employers of a duty to bargain with trade unions recognised as 'representative.' In this way the state consolidated and built on the network of formal structures, rules and procedures which had begun to characterise British industrial relations over the previous thirty years. In so doing it was able to extend the recognition of trade unionism and collective bargaining and address the source of labour unrest as well as its symptoms.<sup>51</sup> The BOT systematically and successfully promoted trade unionism and collective bargaining over the whole period 1896-1913. By 1910 the BOT could report to Parliament that 'the method of

collective bargaining may be said to prevail throughout the whole of our manufacturing industries and to a very considerable extent in regard to the employment of dock and waterside labour, and of labour employed in transportation and sea fishing.<sup>52</sup> In 1896 105 conciliation boards were known to be in existence<sup>53</sup> by 1913 there were 325.<sup>54</sup>

Contemporary writers differ on the significance of the state's intervention at this point. Middlemas sees the pre war Labour Department of the BOT as an 'enlightened bureaucracy, sympathetic to the interests of labour, which took up the cause of trade unionism 'to ameliorate some of the disadvantages suffered by trade unions in industrial bargaining.'<sup>55</sup> Middlemas attributes the character and policy of the Labour Dept., to its key personnel particularly Askwith, the Chief Industrial Conciliator of the Labour Department. 'These years vindicated no one but Askwith and his personal, apparently apolitical, establishment of collective bargaining machinery ... [he] strenuously opposed intervention by individual ministers or governments.'<sup>56</sup> Strong employers, strong unions and a habitual form of bargaining comprised, in his eyes, the best recognition of the rights of the public.'<sup>57</sup>

Davidson <sup>58</sup> however, shows that official decisions were constrained by a broader imperative. He cites evidence which suggests that the extent to which the state

sought to redress the balance in favour of organised labour through conciliation was very limited and circumscribed by the need to safeguard the competitiveness of British industry which, it was thought, would be jeopardised if the state sought to moderate the role of market forces in the determination of wages. This is manifest in the fact that in the overwhelming majority of disputes handled by the BOT in the period 1896-1914, labour achieved its objectives in only 21% of disputes compared to 27% of all industrial stoppages. In addition the majority of disputes handled by the BOT in this period stemmed from trade union demands for wage increases and better working conditions at a time of declining real wages such that the high percentage of compromise settlements under the Conciliation Act represented a serious failure on the part of labour to realise its aims. While he also attributes the character of industrial relations policy in the years before WW1 to officials of the Labour Dept., Davidson argues that these officials saw the state campaigns for union recognition as as much a means of social control as of social equity. The prime concern of officials of the Labour Dept. was that the assault on the legal status of trade unions would exacerbate class conflict and foster the growth of revolutionary socialism. Having said this, however, Davidson goes on to acknowledge an 'underlying identity between the bureaucratic objectives of the Board and the self interest of employers: a concern for the

preservation of the free market, for the security of capital and for the continuity and cost competitiveness of industrial production'<sup>59</sup> such that the main difference between officials of the BOT and employers was over the means by which these objectives might be achieved. Many employers favoured repressive measures involving penal or military sanctions while the BOT saw intervention in wage determination together with welfare legislation as 'the most effective antidote to socialism and the preservative of industrial capitalism'.<sup>60</sup>

Like Middlemas, Fox<sup>61</sup> sees the policies of the BOT as the consequence of the personal qualities and preferences of its leading officials. Fox emphasises however that the object of the Labour Department's policies was to tame the trade unions. In encouraging and promoting union recognition and collective bargaining BOT officials hoped to reform trade unions and move them away from their defensive restrictionist stance towards a responsible role of constructive cooperation with management rather than the 'adversary, win-lose, arms length relations' which characterised collective bargaining at the time.

Price <sup>62</sup> argues however, that 'conciliation and arbitration were symptomatic of a deeper, more profound change within the structures of industrial relations than the creation of a new institutional form. Implicit

in the creation of the boards was the replacement of autonomous regulation with mutual negotiation as the governing mode of employer - employee relationships ... Unlike autonomous regulation mutual negotiation legitimised and formalised a role for the unions within the structure of industrial relations. If mutual negotiation was to be effective, organised representation of masters and men was essential; unionisation and the institutionalisation of masters' associations followed naturally from the demise of autonomous regulation ... Mutual negotiation transformed the status of the unions; for the first time they began to be treated as representative agents of the workmen.'

Price sees the setting up of the Labour Department as the end of a process which occurred between 1870 and 1890 whereby power was moved away from the workplace into the hands of the unions whose role was now integral to the successful workings of the whole system.<sup>63</sup> Mutual negotiation legitimised and formalised a role for the unions within the structure of industrial relations. Up to this point 'As an institutional force, trade unionism had never been anything other than an incipient agent of collective bargaining ... It was the men who had to be disarmed, tamed and disciplined and it was this problem that conciliation and arbitration boards were designed to meet.'<sup>64</sup> If conciliation was to be effective organised

representation of employers and workers was essential hence the Trade Union Act 1871 which freed the trade unions by providing that no trade union, however wide its objects, was henceforth to be illegal because it was 'in restraint of trade' and protection for its funds.<sup>65</sup> At the same time however, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed. This Act effectively re-enacted and codified all the judicial restrictions placed upon strike activity since the Combination Acts. It 'revealed the dual purposes of the labour legislation; on the one hand to buttress the institutions of stability and, on the other, to legitimise employers' discipline.'<sup>66</sup> It did not challenge trade unionism but focused on the methods of autonomous regulation which work groups both unionists and non unionists needed to realise their power.<sup>67</sup>

This view of the role of trade unions in industrial relations policy is supported by the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour 1894. Although Royal Commissions are not noted for ushering in sweeping change, their deliberations are important in defining 'the key problems confronting British capital in its relations with organised labour and in suggesting guidelines for strategy.'<sup>68</sup>

The Royal Commission concluded that trade unions could reduce industrial conflict or exacerbate it but they did not cause it. On the contrary, the encouragement of



responsible elements in trade unionism could greatly assist the state's management of industrial conflict. The Labour Department's policy of conciliation and arbitration aimed to consolidate a responsible leadership in trade unionism, to establish trade unions as an institutional force and to shift decision making power from the rank and file and local activists to the leadership in established unions. Agreements reached through conciliation agreements to which the state was a party imposed a duty to bargain with trade unions recognised as "representative" on employers. By setting up machinery and agreements relevant to particular employers and their employees, the state aimed to assist the development of responsible trade unionism and reduce the scale, scope, violence and bitterness of the industrial conflict which had characterised the emergence of the unskilled unions.

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

In the preceding pages an outline of the complexities of conciliation and arbitration has been sketched. Particular attention has been given to the understandings of trade unionism, of trade union leaders and of the origins and nature of industrial conflict which underpinned the state's adoption of conciliation in the management of industrial conflict.

Evidence to the Royal Commissions led them to conclude that strikes and violence were ordinary incidents of the association of working men in masses. When large numbers of workers were brought together they quickly became aware of their collective power and exerted it readily and violently without regard to the consequences. This was power without responsibility.

The essence of most disputes between employers and employed was 'the shares in which the receipts of their common undertaking shall be divided. By far the largest proportion of disputes, strikes and lockouts have direct reference to the increase or diminution of the standard of wages.'<sup>69</sup>

It was believed that trade unions brought an increased sense of subordination, order and reflection to this state of affairs. Moreover evidence brought before the Commissions had shown that trade unionism combined with conciliation further reduced industrial conflict.

The practice of conciliation and arbitration over the previous thirty years illustrated that the effective management of industrial conflict turned on the promotion of a 'responsible layer' in trade unionism. Conciliation involved investing a group of workers with authority over their peers so that a finger could be publicly pointed at them when solutions to industrial conflict were called for. At the same time this

localisation of responsibility accorded status to leaders ambitious on their own account. This status was however dependent on compliance with standards deemed essential to the national/public interest. It was power tempered with responsibility in that it encouraged the emergence of trade union officials with their own specific interests and a tendency towards conservatism manifest in a preference for constitutional methods of conflict resolution rather than confrontation. They tended to prioritise their own role in negotiations with management at the expense of mass participation in union activities. For the BOT the leadership of trade unions comprised 'all those officials whose duty it is to organise strikes and all persons whom these persons post as pickets.'<sup>70</sup>

However, many employers had hampered the spread of conciliation and responsible trade unionism and contributed to industrial conflict by refusing to recognise trade unions. The efficacy of the Trade Union Act 1871 which aimed to encourage recognition of trade unions and responsibility among the leadership of the trade unions had been reduced by employers' attitude and by reluctance on the part of the rank and file of established trade unions to cede decision making power to their leaders. The wave of industrial conflict which characterised the late 1880s was attributed to employers. 'Many recent conflicts in the ranks of less skilled labour ... seem to have been in reality wholly

due to the determination of members of new trade societies to compel employers to recognise and deal with them.'<sup>71</sup>

It was concluded that the solution to the problem lay in the imposition on industrial relations of a well recognised code of general rules and a competent authority to maintain and explain them. The Conciliation Act was passed in 1896 which designated the Labour Department of the Board of Trade the competent authority and empowered it to devise, maintain and explain a code of general rules for the regulation of industrial relations. Industrial conflict was henceforth to be managed through conciliation and not confrontation. 'The history of legislation proves emphatically that the retention of the common law doctrine of the unlawfulness of trade combinations does nothing whatever to repress the combinations or any of their practices.'<sup>72</sup> Given then that worker organisation was irrepressible and that 'the existence of associations of some kind is indispensable to the formation of either codes of rules or boards of arbitration' it was concluded that 'whatever tends to give a permanent legal and public character to unionism tends, in our judgement, to improve the existing unions and to fit them to cooperate in sound mutual agreements with employers.'<sup>73</sup>

The state's adoption of conciliation was underpinned by an understanding of industrial conflict and of trade union leadership which corresponds with rank and filist premises. It was believed firstly that workers have a vast reservoir of latent disruptive power which was contained by well organised and responsibly led trade unions. Secondly that a clear line of demarcation could be drawn between the leadership of trade unions, activists and the rank and file. It was believed that involvement in conciliation inclined trade union officials towards moderation and that this could be exploited to domesticate the rank and file. The rank and file, led by local officials and activists, was closer to the bulk of the working class which was unpredictable and more ready to resort to more militant and disruptive forms of industrial action.

Subsequent chapters will explore the usefulness of this perspective in the state's management of industrial conflict throughout the period under study beginning in the next chapter with the "Great Unrest".

- 1 For a review of theories of the state see Rosemary Aris, 1990. For an extensive discussion of the character of the state see Carnoy, 1984. Holloway & Picciotto (eds) 1978. Jessop, 1990. Clarke (ed), 1991.
- 2 Miliband, 1969 pp.3-4.
- 3 Pelling, 1971.
- 4 Flanders, 1968 p.14.
- 5 Eleventh and Final Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions 1869. p.12.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid p.35.
- 8 Ibid p.36.
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid p.18
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid p.235.
- 15 Flanders, 1968 p.14.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Hyman, 1975 p.111.
- 18 International Labour Organisation, 1980.
- 19 H.Crompton, 1876 quoted in Allen, 1971.
- 20 Fox, 1985 p.167.
- 21 Tarling & Wilkinson, 1975 p.9.
- 22 Allen, 1971 pp.72-73.
- 23 Quoted in Hyman, 1975 p.111.
- 24 Porter, 1970 p.462.

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- 25 Burns, 1926 pp.385-387.
- 26 Porter, 1970 p.464.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid p.465.
- 29 Ibid passim.
- 30 Porter, 1970 p.470.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Burgess 1975 p.10.
- 34 National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives Monthly Report Nov-Dec.1900 quoted in Porter, 1970 p.473.
- 35 Evans, 1911.
- 36 Porter 1970 p.473.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Kidner, 1979.
- 40 Sharp, 1950.
- 41 Kay, 1979.p.114.
- 42 Sharp, 1950 p.290.
- 43 Price, 1980.
- 44 Royal Commission on Labour 1894 Fifth and Final Report p.29.
- 45 Ibid p.192.
- 46 Ibid, Part 1 June 1894.
- 47 Ibid p.38.
- 48 Sharp 1950 p.294.
- 49 Memorandum on The Progress of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade April 1893.

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- 50 Askwith, 1920. Sharp 1950 p.297.
- 51 International Labour Organisation 1980.
- 52 Sturmthal, 1972 p.56.
- 53 Report on the Strikes and Lockouts of 1896 Cmd 8643  
1897.
- 54 Report on Strikes and Lockouts in 1913 Cmd 7658.1914  
- 16.
- 55 Middlemas, 1979 p.59.
- 56 Ibid p.61.
- 57 Ibid p.63.
- 58 Davidson, 1978 p.590.
- 59 Ibid p.590.
- 60 Ibid p.591.
- 61 Fox, 1985 P.246.
- 62 Price, 1980 pp.120-123.
- 63 Ibid p.220.
- 64 Ibid p.119.
- 65 Fox, 1985 p.153.
- 66 Price, 1980 p.126.
- 67 The Act prohibited picketing defined as the activity  
of individuals or small groups.
- 68 Hyman, 1978. PRO CAB 37/110/63. Report of the Labour  
Department of the Board of Trade to the Cabinet 14th of  
April 1912.
- 69 Royal Commission on Labour 1894 p.38.
- 70 PRO Lab2 /1481/L283/1901 Memorandum by the Labour  
Department of the Board of Trade on the Effects of the  
Taff Vale Judgement\_ 14th August 1901.



71 Ibid p.37.

72 Royal Commission on Labour 1894.

73 Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### The Great Unrest

#### Introduction

It is generally argued that industrial conflict during the years 1910-14, subsequently known as the 'Great Unrest', was the result of British workers espousal en masse of 'direct action' for revolutionary purposes as advocated by the syndicalist movement.<sup>1</sup> Some contemporary writers have been concerned to distance themselves from these views, to see them as overstating the case and the 'General Strike of 1914' as 'a mirage of historians treading the infertile deserts of labour history in search of a revolution manquee'<sup>2</sup>. They have emphasised the diversity of the conflicts at this time, questioned the extent to which they can be described as revolutionary and whether responsibility for the Great Unrest can be laid at the door of the syndicalist movement.<sup>3</sup> One of the more influential commentators, Eric Hobsbawm, concludes that there was no revolutionary threat at this time and that at best syndicalism was 'a slogan of the struggle and not a programme for social transformation.'<sup>4</sup> For Hobsbawm the error lies in historians' failure to take account of the fact that 'class and the problem of class consciousness are inseparable.'<sup>5</sup>

This chapter challenges these views on the grounds that they misunderstand the nature of the revolutionary potential of the working class. This misunderstanding has its roots in the search for class consciousness. This chapter will outline the 'Great Unrest' and set out the BOT's analysis of the conflict and of trade unionism as well as its proposals for maintaining control. From this it will become clear that for the state class consciousness was not characteristic of industrial conflict at this time, nevertheless the industrial unrest was seen as potentially revolutionary. The characteristics of the unrest which made it so in the state's view were the scale and coherence of worker organisation and its rejection of the methods of the established trade unions. The former owed something to the methods of syndicalism. The latter had its roots in industrial unionism.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in the decline of the established trade unions as a power over their members and forced the state to intervene directly to restore industrial peace. However it was recognised that direct state intervention was problematic and that the ill timed use of force could escalate the situation. As previously argued, the reasons for building a framework to permanently contain unrest in the first place were based on the recognition of the disruptive power of the organised working class and the regulatory effects of responsible trade unionism on it. In keeping with these views the state's

management of the 'Great Unrest' was aimed at restoring the influence of responsible trade unionism and breaking up support for the organisations which aimed to supersede it through conciliation procedures. It was thought that conciliation could weaken worker organisation by dissipating its grass roots support whereas confrontation at this time was more likely to strengthen it. This policy withstood the impact of the 'Great Unrest'.

#### Industrial Unrest 1910-12.

The years 1910-12 subsequently became known as the 'Great Unrest' because they were characterised by industrial conflict on a scale previously unheard of in Britain. The first main phase of the "Great Unrest" began with the rapid escalation of discontent in the South Wales coalfields.

On September 1st 1910 the Cambrian Combine closed the Ely pit, part of the Naval Collieries, after the failure of the South Wales Conciliation Board to settle on a price for the working of a seam which was subject to difficult geological conditions. Nine hundred men were thrown out of work. By 19th of September all the pits of the Cambrian Combine were on strike in sympathy with these workers and in defiance of a decision taken by the S.W.M.F. that work should be resumed pending a ballot of the whole coalfield.

The strike continued to spread until 10,000 men were out on strike. By November 1910 the Rhondda and Aberdare valleys and the Tonypandy area were the scene of bitter conflict. Confrontation and sabotage were widespread. Various tactics were used by the miners to end the dispute including mass picketing, attacking collieries which were still operating and mine managers' homes and hounding blacklegs brought in to keep the collieries working. Employers resisted with the help of local and imported police and later troops. Violent battles developed, notably at Tonypandy, where strikers responded to police tactics by looting shops. There were many casualties.<sup>7</sup>

The Labour Department intervened and attempted to mediate between the coalowners and miners but was unable to break the deadlock. The strike continued with the S.W.M.F. being financially supported by the M.F.G.B. The M.F.G.B. attempted to reach a settlement through a meeting with the coalowners in which it was agreed that the employers' terms should be given a year's trial. This was unanimously rejected by the S.W.M.F. whereupon the M.F.G.B. withdrew its support on August 31st 1911 and the miners returned to work on the terms offered by the employers in the previous October.

Meanwhile on the 14th of June 1911 the National Sailors and Firemens' Union had declared a general strike at

Southampton in support of demands for a conciliation board, a minimum rate of wages, reduced working hours and various changes in working conditions. The Shipowners brought in blackleg labour and the by the 20th of June the strike had spread to Goole and Hull where the dock labourers struck in support of the seamen and put forward claims of their own. The strike spread to Manchester and Liverpool where the Seamen's union stopped the White Star Line's 'Olympic' on her maiden voyage in order to force the Shipping Federation to recognise the union for collective bargaining purposes and thereby negotiate improvements in pay and conditions. The strike came to include dockers and workers in factories and processing plants who initially struck in sympathy but later framed demands of their own. The circumstances of the strike suggested the presence of syndicalism to many commentators on the Transport strikes of 1911 and the prior Cambrian Combine strike. For example, the Board of Trade investigator J.P.Moylan discerned the influence of syndicalism promoted by a small group of hitherto unknown young syndicalists which threatened the position of established union leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The Transport strike was characterised by hostility towards mediation attempts by union leaders and the Board of Trade and widespread violence including assaults on blacklegs, attacks on the offices of shipowners and a Labour Exchange operated by the

Shipping Federation. George Askwith of the Board of Trade reported that 'the union leaders have little control and are now frightened'.<sup>9</sup> About four hundred extra police were drafted in from other areas but on the 1st of July workers rejected a further settlement and the meeting broke into a riot. A further five hundred police were sent to the area to maintain control.

On the 18th of July shipowners in Cardiff attempted to use Chinese labour to unload the S.S. Annan and police were unable to control the subsequent riot in which the quayside was set alight. Extra police were imported and the next day Cardiff was virtually in the grip of a general strike when workers in many trades came out in sympathy with the waterfront workers. The Chief Constable expressed the view that this sympathetic strike owed much to the 'considerable influence ...exercised by bodies of men and women going from place to place with a view to inducing those inclined to remain at work to join their ranks'.<sup>10</sup>

By mid July negotiations were in progress to end the strike but before these had been completed more conflict broke out in early August in London. Waterfront union leaders had accepted the terms of the Devonport Agreement which gave substantial increases to most groups of waterfront workers but this agreement was rejected by the dockers who wanted more and this

led to unofficial strike action throughout the London dock system. Official union calls for a return to work went unheeded. The state intervened as the strike paralysed the docks and food supplies dwindled. Agreements were reached by the end of August which gave wage rises to workers not covered by the Devonport agreement and concessions were made on the issue of the employment of casual labour under pressure from the state. Before the month was out, however, conflict surfaced amongst railway workers in Liverpool in response to the pressure of falling real wages and hostility towards the Conciliation Boards set up in 1907.

Unofficial strike action was taken by Merseyside railwaymen and centred initially on goods services where many workers were employed in railway depots on the docks and had close contact with waterfront workers. By mid August fifteen thousand railwaymen were out on strike and were quickly followed by coal porters, lightermen and carters until a total of about eighty thousand workers were on strike. Port employers responded with a general lockout and the Strike Committee declared a general strike.<sup>11</sup>

This was the biggest rail strike in history. There was mass picketing and violence. There were attacks on blackleg labour and on goods in transit and fires were started in dockyard areas. The Liverpool City



authorities formed a committee of public safety and called in large numbers of police and troops until by the middle of August there were three thousand troops, several hundred imported police and two gunboats moored on the Mersey with their guns trained on the city. At the same time the War Office dispatched troops to many industrial areas both with and without the request of the civil authorities and the Home Secretary (Winston Churchill) announced that Britain was under the control of the military authorities.<sup>12</sup>

The strike came to a head in the third week in August when a peaceful mass demonstration of eighty thousand workers, including women and children, sponsored by the National Transport Workers' Federation was broken up with a 'merciless use of violence that horrified those who saw it',<sup>13</sup>. Troops with fixed bayonets and loaded rifles fired on the crowds - one man was killed and many others wounded.<sup>14</sup> Agreements were reached in the wake of this conflict after the state had interceded and a general return to work began. The settlement provided for the setting up of a Royal Commission to look into the Conciliation scheme of 1907 and all strikers were to be reinstated without penalties.

On October 18th the Commission produced its Report which was rejected by the unions who called for a meeting with the railway companies to discuss it - they refused. The unions prepared to ballot their members on

whether to renew the strike. In the House of Commons the Labour Party condemned the railway companies' intransigence and put forward an amended resolution calling for a meeting to discuss 'the best means of giving effect to the Report.'<sup>15</sup> The vote was carried and the railway companies agreed to attend a meeting under state auspices. A settlement was reached on the basis of a modified Report and the strike threat was lifted.

The new improved Conciliation Scheme 1911 however, still refused trade union recognition. It only instituted a system of Boards peopled by worker representatives who had to petition management. Nevertheless railway companies were forced to negotiate indirectly with the unions because workers could choose their representatives from any source and in practice these tended to be trade union officials.

#### **The State's Analysis of the Industrial Conflict.**

Amid calls for the Government to take more stringent action to stem the tide of industrial conflict, the BOT was asked to submit a report on the situation to the Cabinet in July 1911. This report provided the basis for the reconsideration of existing state policy towards industrial conflict. The report began by noting that the largest and most virulent strikes which marked the current outburst of unrest involved 'the three

classes of labour in which the community as such is most deeply entrusted<sup>16</sup>.' Its findings confirm Cole's view<sup>17</sup> that the underlying cause of unrest is always the same. 'The one permanent basis of discontent ... [which] ... at bottom justifies all revolution and makes all strikes, however wrong in their particular circumstances, ultimately right and defensible' is the general feeling that 'all labour is robbed' - exploitation. <sup>18</sup> For Cole and the BOT the labour unrest of 1910 - 12 was no exception being mainly the consequence of the fact that between 1900 and 1910 wages were static but prices rose considerably. The BOT was unprepared however for the ferocity of the explosion of industrial conflict at this time. Its first assessment of it is set out below. It embarks on a comparative and historical study of industrial conflict in order to identify any new factors which could account for the severity of the outbreak.<sup>19</sup>

The industrial unrest displayed certain characteristics which, according to the BOT, distinguished it from earlier periods of industrial conflict. Most notably, attention was drawn to the speed and success of strike movements and the readiness with which the better organised trades, like miners and railwaymen, gave support to each other and the transport workers. For example, the Seamens' strike which was called on the 16th of June 1911 had been threatened for some time but was not generally expected to be serious. The Shipping

Federation was aware that if a strike did break out it would present problems because of the shortage of seamen, but no-one foresaw the extent of the support the strike attracted from transport workers or the cohesiveness of the different workers involved. The Seamens' Union was a weak institution and the Transport Workers' Federation embryonic and yet this strike achieved far reaching concessions and engendered such a belief in collective action among the workers that they felt they had the power to stop the trade of any port. This victory owed much to the fact that shipowners were reluctant to leave ships idle while trade was good. Nevertheless, it did not account for the spontaneous character and improved organisation of the disturbances in the labour world which forced employers to concede the seamen's demands.

In summing up it was concluded that the main cause of unrest was the same in 1910-11 as it had been in the past - the conflict between workers and employers over wages. Specifically in this period the cost of living had increased while wages had not. However a combination of factors over the previous thirty years or so had led to a change in the character of industrial conflict. Firstly there had been an increase in casual employment combined with an increased risk of unemployment. In the conditions of modern competitive industry employers tended to see the labour force as something to be switched off and on like electric

current as required and that any decrease in the certainty and continuity of employment causes unrest.

Secondly, because the workers of 1910 were better educated, "propaganda" had a bigger impact and workers were more concerned with social questions than hitherto. Books such as "Merrie England" written by Blatchford had sold by the million and had had a profound effect. The cheap press and advances in communication had made workers more homogenous, more aware of their common interests and more inclined to act collectively - aware that there is strength and safety in numbers. However, although it was recognised that 'older unionists' complaints about the younger union men being 'rotten with socialism', undisciplined and spoiling for a fight were not unfounded it was concluded that most of the workers concerned 'do not realise what a fight to the finish means' - they had only a superficial understanding of socialism. They had developed new methods but not new aims in their struggle.<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, their new methods had been assisted by the growth of specialisation in industry which had increased interdependence among the various branches such that 'the dockers can stop the whole trade of a port and a few hundred collierymen can threaten to stop all the coal mines in Scotland.'<sup>21</sup>

Fourthly it was noted that workers' struggle had been advanced by 'a change in middle and upper class attitudes, among whom Victorian theories as to capital and labour have become obsolete' although 'no settled body of doctrine has emerged to take their place'<sup>22</sup>. Instead there was now a disposition to try to see things from the worker's point of view and to wonder, not why he is discontented, but that he has been patient for so long. Finally and most importantly there was a marked decline in the influence of the established trade unions.

The central focus of this report is the fear of the 'sympathetic strike' and the grave consequences that would ensue 'should there be any widespread acceptance of the sympathetic strike policy'.<sup>23</sup> In the joint opinion of Askwith and Mitchell of the Board of Trade, 'a new force has arisen in trade unionism and on every hand there is evidence to show that the power of the old leaders has been superseded.' That this new force had been so influential among workers was shown firstly by the fact that there were practically no successors to the moderating influences exerted by trade union leaders such as Burt, Fenwick, Knight, Burnett, Bowerman, Bell, Maudsley, Mabon and Chandler. When any of the more moderate union leaders retired they were replaced by very different types of men and the moderates still in office had practically no influence. This change was manifest in the Northumberland miners'

decision to abolish the three shift system in defiance of an agreement only just reached, the triumph of the rank and file of the Boilermakers over their executive, the recent printers' dispute, the complete annihilation of the policy pursued by Mr Bell in connection with the railways, the ascendancy of Mr Crinion as the dominating influence in Lancashire, the capture of the South Wales Miners Federation by the Tonypandy men and the almost complete obliteration of Mr Chandler as a force in trade unionism.

Secondly it was illustrated by the emergence of "industrial unionism", having Tom Mann as its most active advocate, the central practical idea of which is the sympathetic strike.

Thirdly, it was advocated widely by the workers themselves. Mitchell believed that the success of the movement for better conditions among transport workers was attributed by the men to those who struck in sympathy and that the old leaders' opposition to the sympathetic strike was due to their desire to conserve their union funds to fight their own battles. This conservative policy was thought to be rapidly weakening and there was a strong feeling amongst trade unionists that trade union policy generally would become more aggressive and united which means the more extensive adoption of the "general strike" policy. Signs of this were discerned in the miners' constant demand that the

MFGB should put its twentieth rule into operation. This rule stated that 'whenever any county, federation or other district is attacked on the wage question, all members connected with the Society shall tender a notice to terminate their contracts if approved of by a conference called to consider the advisability of such joint action being taken.'

Lastly Mitchell pointed to the significant development amongst transport workers whereby all sections (seamen, dockers, carters, labourers) were united in one organisation - the Transport Workers Federation - which gave its leaders (J.H. Wilson, Tom Mann and Ben Tillet) enormous power. All indicators showed the probability of railwaymen joining these new forces as during the Hull and Manchester disputes. Mitchell believed that workers were attracted to the new policy and would seek its more extensive application. In the hands of the leaders named, he argued, who are supported almost without exception by the younger local leaders who have largely displaced the older and more moderate men, anything might happen in the near future, indeed possible consequences of a very grave nature have been put forward - for instance, a refusal to handle goods by railwaymen is only a step removed from refusal to handle special trains (troop trains).<sup>24</sup>

By 1911 the overall conclusion of Askwith and Mitchell was clear. The most threatening aspect of the



industrial conflict was the coherence and scale of worker organisation. 'It may be said that difficulties such as are being experienced are cyclical and pass away after a period of unrest. But there is a fundamental difference between past periods of unrest and the present one which renders this view complacent. The earlier movements were spasmodic and had little national cohesion. The present one is essentially national and frankly aims at complete stoppage with all the advantages of organised bodies in their separate trades acting together. During the last thirty years the regiments have been formed and disciplined and are now, practically for the first time, acting together as an army. Thirty years ago the "general strike " was a very shadowy proposal. Now it is a definite objective deliberately advocated by the same men who have achieved at least some success in the present struggle. We are in fact thirty years older and labour men, like others, learn from experience ... these being our general views of the situation we are driven to the conclusion that some effort should be made to maintain control.'

25

#### **The Industrial Council**

On 9th August 1911 the President of the BOT, Sydney Buxton, endorsed this appraisal of the situation and put forward the BOT's recommendations for maintaining

control<sup>26</sup>. Buxton noted that the unrest and its consequences had directed public attention to the question of the improvement of the official machinery for preventing or shortening industrial warfare and suggested that the public would welcome and support any well considered measure for dealing more effectively with the question especially if it could be utilised to anticipate and thus to prevent disputes from culminating in a strike or lockout. Buxton stated that it was now generally recognised that industrial disputes were not merely the concern of the parties directly involved and that the question was not whether the state should interfere in trade disputes but what form this interference should take. There was a growing demand for machinery which would operate quickly and automatically. However Buxton was dismissive of the many crude suggestions which had been offered as solutions of the industrial conflict and of the unrealistic expectations of the existing machinery set up to deal with the problem. He called for the greatest circumspection in taking any steps to address the problem since 'a step taken in the wrong direction might do great damage and undo much of the patient work which has been gradually accomplished in recent years by administrative action on the part of the Board of Trade.'<sup>27</sup>

In view of the foregoing Buxton suggested that any action taken could follow two distinct lines. Firstly,

official or judicial powers of compulsion could be strengthened either as regards the initial step of requiring the submission of a dispute to conciliation or arbitration before a stoppage of work takes place or with regard to the enforcement on both sides of an award when made by a court or both these powers. Secondly the official machinery available for conciliation, enquiry and (in suitable cases) decision could be improved.

Buxton rejected compulsory arbitration since 'it is quite certain that neither public opinion nor the opinion of employers nor of workmen would assent to the compulsory enforcement of an arbitration award.'<sup>28</sup> The British tradition has 'favoured elasticity of machinery proceeding by way of conciliation, enquiry and agreement with no reference to arbitration except by consent and with arbitration awards (so-called) resting solely on moral sanctions.'<sup>29</sup>

Buxton was more in favour of the suggestion (which he identified as substantially the Canadian, Lemieux - MacKenzie - King Act) that judicial powers of compulsion could be strengthened either as regards the initial step of requiring the submission of a dispute to conciliation or arbitration before a stoppage of work took place. This suggestion had much to recommend it, in Buxton's view, in that it gave time for consideration, investigation and report before a strike

or lockout could take place, and he advocated that 'it might be found practicable with general assent, to legislate more or less on those lines.'<sup>30</sup> The President of the BOT emphasised however that this reform would require legislation which could not be attempted that year but the necessary delay would give an opportunity for consideration and consultation on the subject and administrative action would have to be resorted to in the meantime. The latter consisted of powers under the Conciliation Act 1896 given to the BOT to promote amicable settlements between parties to disputes. It was explained that the idea behind this was to overcome the suspicion which is sometimes entertained of single arbitrators while avoiding the dangers of setting up a Court consisting permanently of the same people. Nevertheless, Buxton pointed out that while the BOT's interventions had largely been welcomed this was not always the case.

It was concluded that the weakness of the present system lay in the fact that every act done in the direction of conciliation was the direct administrative act of a department which was, and was known to be, under a political head. Given this it was inevitable that at any given time, one party or the other to a dispute would suspect BOT intervention. There was therefore reason to believe that the work of the BOT was materially impaired by the belief (with however little foundation) that it was subject to political

influences which favoured one or other parties to a controversy.

The strengths of the existing system lay in the fact that the BOT was flexible and unhampered by formal rules and able to respond in any particular case with solutions which seemed most appropriate. There was no court consisting of named individuals who might become the focus of discontent at an unpopular decision. The problem was how the political disadvantage was to be eliminated without changing the existing system.

With this in mind Buxton considered Sir Charles Macara's plan to transfer the jurisdiction of the BOT with regard to labour disputes to an independent court under an "Industrial Judge". This plan was rejected on the grounds that it would mean the repeal of the Conciliation Act to divest the BOT of its duty and on the grounds that the 'transfer of these powers to an independent and therefore an irresponsible Tribunal' <sup>31</sup> would have little chance of being accepted by Parliament. Even if it was accepted, Buxton went on, there would still be the difficulty that the new Tribunal, in order to safeguard its independence, would have to be permanent in constitution and withdrawn from the control of Parliament, like the Courts of Law. It was felt that the parties concerned would not agree to such a proposal. In addition it was thought probable that in the case of a permanent body such as this, its

method of handling a particular dispute or its refusal to intervene, or the nature of its decision would in some cases give cause for dissatisfaction to one or both sides. It would not be safeguarded as at present, by the anonymity of the Board of Trade, the periodical changes of Ministers or the power which a great administrative Department can exercise of shifting about or supplementing the officers in charge of particular branches of work. The Industrial Court could find itself out of favour for any of these reasons and it would simply cease to be invoked with the result that recourse to the mediation of the BOT would simply begin again in the way that it did before the Conciliation Act and there would be two rival official agencies which would be highly inadvisable.

It was decided that the solution to the problem of bias was reorganisation within the BOT. The BOT, Buxton concluded, was of the opinion that any Office or Court charged with conciliation and arbitration should not be divorced from the BOT; that enough connection should be kept between them as to obviate the possibility of the future growth of two rival systems of mediation in labour disputes and also to secure the ultimate control of Parliament.

It was proposed that this could be secured and the difficulties circumvented by the expedient of delegating the Board's responsibility for action to an

officer, to be called an Industrial Commissioner or Chairman of the Court of Conciliation or Arbitration or by some other appropriate name. This officer would hold a position in relation to the BOT analogous to that of the Comptroller General of Patents. The Patent Office, it was clarified, is administratively a branch of the BOT but the Comptroller is a judicial person who is solely responsible for certain classes of acts and decisions and is not under the direction of the President of the BOT. An Industrial Office could be constituted, presided over by a Commissioner with a suitable staff and an Advisory Council all appointed by the BOT such that it would be unnecessary to refer to the BOT with regard to action to be taken in any particular dispute.

The BOT should therefore appoint twenty four Industrial Commissioners to include twelve employers' representatives and twelve workers' representatives under the chairmanship of a Chief Industrial Commissioner assisted by a suitable departmental staff with power to inquire into and report upon any industrial dispute referred to them affecting any of the principal trades of the country, and likely to cause disputes involving ancillary trades or which the parties ,before or after the breaking out of a dispute, are unable to settle.

In addition to the powers conferred upon the Chief Commissioner as chairman of the Commissioners, it would be his duty to carry out on behalf of the BOT the duties conferred upon the Board under the Conciliation Act and any other work now carried out by the Labour Dept. of the BOT so far as conciliation in labour disputes is concerned. The avowed object of the Government in appointing Industrial Commissioners with an impartial Chairman would be 'to avoid the appearance of undue Governmental interference with the problems which the trades of the country should specially interest themselves in settling.'<sup>32</sup> In taking this course it was to be made clear that the government did not desire to hinder any voluntary methods or agreements then in force or likely to be adopted for the prevention of stoppage of work or the settlement of disputes, but to afford an opportunity in any trade of referring such difficulties as may arise to investigation, conciliation or arbitration more extensively than had previously been the case. The object and effect of the new departure was to decrease the present great waste of national resources by industrial war. Further, this organisation was to provide machinery which might facilitate the adoption of legislation along the lines of the Canadian model if thought advisable. The President of the BOT ended by emphasising that it would be undesirable to put the above or any other plan before the employers and workmen who were to meet the Prime Minister since it



might be fatal to success if it appeared that the BOT had already worked out a plan before the conference. It was most important not to give this impression 'but rather to elicit the suggestions of the various representatives than to present them with a scheme as from the Board of Trade.'<sup>33</sup>

An initial round of talks between employers and workers representatives and the state took place on the 15th August 1911 and the Industrial Council was established on the 10th October 1911. The employers representatives included Charles Macara himself.

The Council was chaired by George Askwith, now knighted and given the title of Comptroller General of the Labour Dept. of the BOT and Chief Industrial Commissioner. At the first meeting of the Council on the 26th October 1911 Buxton, President of the BOT stressed that the 'last thing' he desired was 'to lay before you a cut and dried scheme.'<sup>34</sup> In the Memorandum establishing the Council on the 10th October 1911, however, it had been emphasised that the main role of the Industrial Council was to supplement and strengthen the operation of the BOT in the discharge of its duties under the Conciliation Act of 1896.

From the beginning the Industrial Council lacked power and influence and failed to gain the confidence of both

employers and trade unions particularly those not directly represented by the the members of the Council. However, the further subdivision of the BOT to produce the special Dept.dealing with labour problems under Askwith had the effect desired by the President of the BOT. As a forum seemingly independent of the BOT, (which had suffered from accusations of bias towards employers and labour in turn) it gave the impression of impartiality and action while reinforcing and extending the status quo. It supplemented strengthened and expanded the operation of the BOT in the discharge of its duties under the Conciliation Act and gave the impression that something new was being done. Lastly it bought time for the measures set in motion by the Labour Department to work.

#### **Proposals for State Strategy.**

In the intervening period the situation had been closely monitored at the request of the Prime Minister (Asquith) and two further reports were submitted to the Cabinet by the President of the BOT and the Chief Industrial Commissioner in April 1912.<sup>35</sup> These reports assessed the impact of the great strikes on the workers themselves, on the trade unions, on the country and on the state's management of industrial conflict.

It was noted firstly that the railwaymen's strike of the previous August had been a failure from the

workers' point of view and they were very disappointed. 'They struck in order to obtain "recognition" which would at once lead to a large increase in wages. They did not obtain recognition in the sense in which they interpreted it, namely direct negotiations as in other trades between the company and the officers of the trade union. They did not obtain any advance in wages in any grade from the strike itself though, after the strike was over, and no doubt partly in consequence of the strike, the companies produced a considerable amount of conscience money for the lower grades. 'The railwaymen live in hopes, however, that by means of the newly constituted conciliation boards, which meet in May, further considerable concessions will be obtained. Unfortunately their demands are being put very high and are almost bound to lead to disappointment. The leaders at least propose to continue to act under the constitution which came into being under the Royal Commission <sup>36</sup> but the leaders are not strong men and their influence is by no means supreme.'<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile it was noted that the coal strike had in some ways eased the position. On the one hand the generous consideration shown on the whole by the railway companies to the men during the great reduction of employment which was consequent on the [coal] strike had tended to materially improve the relations between the men and the managers. On the other hand the funds of the Amalgamated Society [of Railway Servants] were depleted to the extent of some £100,000 by the coal

strike and to this extent the union has been crippled as a fighting force.

With regard to the miners it was thought to be too early to estimate the effect of the strike on their future action. It was noted that 'The men are sulky, suspicious and disappointed' because 'The promises freely made by their extreme leaders of a week or two's holiday and the early concession of their full demands by the owners, under pressure from the community, have not been fulfilled.' Neither the community nor the government had been terrorised or brought to their knees but quite the contrary. The moderate leaders had allowed themselves to be overawed by the extremists. The Executive and the Conference [MFGB] had continually shrunk from taking responsibility or failed to give a lead. The result was that the trade union leadership 'both forwards and moderates have come out of the conflict discredited and have greatly diminished influence.' The Federation itself had been shaken to its foundations and it was thought possible that it would not survive the shock and that a process of local disintegration might set in. Further, it was noted 'the miners have now experienced, very much against their will in the case of a large minority and against the anticipations of all, the discomforts and sufferings of a strike and their funds are for the most part exhausted. It is at least doubtful therefore whether, whatever may be the decisions of the Joint District

[conciliation] Boards or of the chairmen (and in some cases at least they are bound to be disappointing), the Federation, the leaders or the miners will be in a position, or care to put up another at the present.'<sup>38</sup>

The Transport workers were a very different matter for the President of the Labour Department. The success of the seamen in the previous summer 'in a strike which precluded anticipation by the Shipping Federation, was astonishingly rapid and thorough. The dockers and others followed suit and also obtained large concessions. The result was a very great increase in the membership and in the funds of the respective transport trade unions, great elation on the part of the men and a confident belief in their power of forcing a successful strike, either for themselves or for others in cooperation with them. I do not myself believe that syndicalism as such has acquired any hold in the country though the South Wales miners' strike caused alarm and the recent prosecutions have given it an unlooked for advertisement.'<sup>39</sup> What was more worrying for the President was the 'sympathetic strike idea' which 'has made great strides and the more extreme of the transport workers (both leaders and men) are under the impression that they could, by a sympathetic strike of all the import transport workers including the railwaymen, "hold up" the country and enact practically any terms they chose.' However, 'the comparative ill success of the railway strike and the

failure of the miners to exact their terms have shown that the country is not so easily held up as was supposed. The object lesson of the miners' strike, that the brunt of the suffering of a general strike falls on the working classes themselves has probably somewhat cooled their ardour. Further, the more moderate leaders at all events are anxious not to endanger what they gained last year by a precipitate and unsuccessful fight.' Finally the Transport Workers Association 'is a very heterogenous body and its organisation is not yet a year old'.<sup>40</sup>

Although these factors indicated that industrial conflict would probably not escalate, it was noted that 'there is at least a possibility that the seamen might come out as a protest against the prosecution of Tom Mann ... Though such action would greatly embarrass other unions, as the strike would be political and not industrial, it would undoubtedly just now receive great sympathy and possibly receive sympathetic backing from other unions on the ground that it was a protest against "free speech" and against "strike breaking"'.<sup>41</sup>

It was concluded that there were certain disquieting features of the situation which found their clearest expression in the transport workers' organisation and had profound implications for the management of industrial conflict. Firstly, any strike which before would have been purely local in character or confined

to a trade, 'may now easily develop into a strike on a large scale. Secondly, a strike affecting the utility services will not only be sympathetic but will, in all probability, be begun without notice and in total disregard of any agreement, legal or otherwise.'

Thirdly, a change for the worse had come over the trade union movement in respect of the attitude of the men towards their leaders and towards agreements 'a change of attitude not confined to the less skilled and more "rabble" trade unions. The leaders no longer possess the confidence and are not allowed the executive authority that used to be reposed in them. A recommendation by the leaders used, for the most part, to be loyally adopted and carried out ... The leaders have lost influence and consequently self confidence and naturally are unwilling to take the same responsibility as they would gladly have taken and did take under former conditions. The newer leaders have little respect for agreements and their own signatures. All this makes collective bargaining far less certain, effective and peacemaking.'<sup>42</sup> Fourthly, the Labour Party has almost completely collapsed as an effective influence in labour disputes. They are not consulted and are not involved in the current disputes. They tried 'to act as a go-between for the men and the government but they had very little actual influence over the action of the men or on the result. During the miners' strike the miners' representatives professed to belong to the Labour Party in the House but the Labour

Party exercised no influence over them at all. The miners used them as a "cat's paw." This was 'a distinct loss to industrial peace' since the influence of the Labour Party 'if it still existed, would be moderate and constitutional on leadership and action ... they may be forced to seek to regain their influence by taking up a more aggressive attitude on labour questions.'<sup>43</sup>

For the Chief Industrial Commissioner three factors made the continuation of industrial conflict likely. Firstly, 'organised unions and disorganised masses of workers have become more or less organised, they have felt their strength and discovered that their strength is greatly increased by united action.' Secondly, 'the causes of the industrial conflict in 1910-11, particularly the cost of living, are unlikely to be minimised in the near future. Owing to the coal strike, the importation of foreign food, meat and corn will be greatly hampered by the delays and so on in sailing and freights of ships due to the lack of coal and the certainty that it will be some time before coal supplies are back to normal. The scarcity of food means that the advantages of any gains made by workers in 1911 will be diminished.' Thirdly, employers may attempt to get back concessions made as a result of strikes and this may provoke 'very stern resistance by the workers.'<sup>44</sup> Lastly it was emphasised that the country would suffer very badly from any further large



scale strikes in coal, railways and transport and these were the industries in which workers' leverage was greatest.

For Askwith industrial disputes might well continue but the organisation which had underpinned the industrial conflict need not. 'The form of the agitation will depend upon the claims remaining after the Joint District Boards have done their work.'<sup>45</sup> Measures had already been taken to weaken the organisation which had made the industrial conflict so threatening.

Conciliation machinery had been set up in the coal industry and on the railways. In the coal industry, it was noted, workers' future action would depend on the outcome of the Joint District Board meetings. Askwith pointed out that 'the decisions of the Boards or Chairmen will in all likelihood fall short of the hopes with which the strike was entered upon' ...

[nevertheless] ... 'if the main grievances such as "abnormal places" and "low paid men" are removed a period of comparative quiet will follow.' It was acknowledged that 'Scotland may present difficulties when its agreement expires in July' but this was not thought significant because 'a stoppage in Scotland or any other isolated district will not raise serious alarm.' It was concluded that 'notwithstanding some agitation in districts where the awards are disappointing and uncertainty and fear consequent upon the new condition of affairs under the Act'<sup>46</sup> the mining

difficulty may be taken as out of the way as far as the national danger is concerned.'<sup>47</sup>

On the railways no immediate difficulties were expected from workers because 'their new Boards have been formed, they have been heavily hit by the miners' strike and have had to pay out large sums in unemployment benefit. With railwaymen as contrary to miners, careful administration may possibly tend gradually to disintegrate the wonderful combination of last year. The grade system on the railways and the power in the hands of the companies of lightermen must ultimately have its effect. The danger from railways does not in fact rest so much within the ranks of railwaymen themselves as it does in the possibility of their organisation being stampeded by other allied sections. This danger lies particularly in the close connection with transport workers ... It would not be wise to ignore this possibility of action and even greater danger of united action.'<sup>48</sup> The Labour Department went on to review the options available for counteracting this threat.

The first option, of doing nothing and allowing the situation to run its course, was rejected on the grounds that this would mean a constant war between the parties growing bigger until it would reach something approaching a civil war. Secondly, things could be left as they were and matters allowed to take their course.

This would involve the state intervening and attempting to mediate difficulties as they arose in the usual way. It was emphasised that this policy had been vindicated by its results on the railways and in the mines but that further action of this type in these industries would be difficult and premature - 'this policy takes time to show its full effects.' Calls for immediate government action 'to relieve the harassment of industry are not silenced by this policy.' Given this, some other course of action, if necessary, could be undertaken by the government. However none of the many suggestions put forward by uninformed people such as compulsory arbitration, extension of trade boards, the doctrine of the Canadian act, enforcement of collective bargaining and so on, nor any feasible course of legislative enactment would address the situation as outlined above or convince the country that panic legislation had not been undertaken. It was realised that because of the power of the 'new force' in trade unionism 'stringent action' would not have the desired effect. 'It is certain that in the present temper of labour and capital any crude proposals of this nature would be bitterly resisted by organised labour. The difficulty in this matter is the difficulty of enforcing them especially on the men. Men cannot be made to work if they will not work and they cannot be imprisoned (a million miners for instance) for striking. Apart from " conspiracy to defeat the law " under which the leaders in Australia might be

prosecuted, a pecuniary penalty is the only alternative. A penalty not easy to impose or to enforce.<sup>49</sup> What was wanted was a 'careful inquiry' which might take a number of forms.<sup>50</sup>

Firstly, a Parliamentary inquiry. It was acknowledged that this had its uses but was rejected as impracticable at this time because Labour members of Parliament were not the real leaders of the labour movements being considered and even if they had been, the method of selection of such committees would preclude a sufficient number being members of the committee.

Secondly, a Royal Commission. The Commissioner acknowledged the criticisms levelled against such bodies notably, that they tended to create and shelve problems rather than solve them, that their deliberations were long and tedious and bore no relation to what was actually happening. Members often needed educating as to what the problem actually was and they were subject to exploitation by 'faddists.' On the positive side he felt that they did collect a mass of valuable evidence and allowed the consideration of many hitherto unknown grievances together with practical solutions for their redress.

Lastly, Commissioners could be appointed with first hand knowledge of the problem. This could be called a Royal Commission but be composed of a small number of

people capable of dealing with the actual problem with no preconceived ideas or fads and with a working knowledge of the movement to supplant the generally conceived methods of trade unions (moderate trade union policy). Such people, according to the Commissioner, might make sensible suggestions and even if they could not agree on many issues, might be able to put forward ways in which, for example, the unionist/non-unionist difficulty might be solved, or ways in which bargains entered into might have a reasonable chance of being kept. The exact composition of such a body, it was decided, would depend on its frame of reference. 'The reference might be put on a very wide basis provided that the special attention of the commissioners was drawn to the present situation and the necessity for an early report for example :- to enquire and report as to the extent, character and causes of the unrest and discontent among certain sections of the industrial population which have manifested themselves in recent labour disputes, and especially to enquire and report at an early date as to the best means of securing that the industries in which continuity of work is essential to the community shall be carried on and to recommend what steps, if any, are advisable to deal with the situation whether by legislative, administrative or voluntary action'.<sup>51</sup>

However, if the Commission's brief was to concentrate only on those trades from which special danger was

apprehended then a very small commission of capable practical men representing both employers and employed and consisting of men in the thick of the fight including men like Gosling, Smillie, and Vernon Hartshorn on the labour side together with three or four persons representing the community might be selected. With regard to this corporatist solution Askwith commented that 'Inclusion of the extreme leaders might tend to bring home to them more fully a sense of public responsibility and the interests of the nation as well as their perfectly legitimate aspirations for themselves and their particular trades.'<sup>52</sup>

It was concluded however that there were limits to the usefulness of commissions and bodies set up to address the question of trade disputes and combinations - 'We do not think they offer the solution of existing problems.'<sup>53</sup> The President of the BOT advised the Cabinet that 'The whole question of industrial unrest is obviously one abounding in difficulties of all sorts. It appears clear that the government cannot wholly or effectively move in the direction of legislation or even administrative action without much fuller information than they have at their disposal and after much greater consideration of the question than they have yet been able to give.'<sup>54</sup> The next section will show that, as predicted, industrial conflict continued but the measures taken by the Labour

Department in the direction of conciliation served to weaken the 'new force' in worker organisation.

#### **The Miners' and the Transport Workers' Strikes of 1912**

Both old grievances and the sympathetic strike were to rise again very quickly and in 1912 the Miners' Federation of Great Britain demanded a National Minimum Wage from the coalowners represented by the Mining Association. The latter agreed only that local negotiations might take place. The miners accepted this but threatened national strike action if a settlement was not reached in all areas. Negotiations in Scotland, South Wales, Northumberland and Durham ended in stalemate whereupon the Miners Federation took a strike ballot which resulted in overwhelming support for a national strike. This strike involved one million workers and was the largest Britain had yet seen.

The state intervened and proposals were drawn up for the settlement of the dispute endorsing the miners' claim to a minimum wage but with the proviso that this must be settled on a local basis by agreement or government arbitration. The coalowners were divided on this. The miners accepted on condition that the minimum wage should not be less than 5/- a shift for an adult miner anywhere in the country. However the Coal Mines Minimum Wage Act 1912 recognised only the principle of a minimum wage and did not fix specific wages in

different coalfields or specify the minimum.<sup>55</sup> This was rejected by a majority of miners but the Miners' Federation considered this majority insufficient and ordered a return to work. Unrest mounted at this decision in large mining areas, notably Northumberland and Durham, which had voted overwhelmingly against a return to work and this was the source of much organised resistance to the return and a widespread anti - leadership crusade.<sup>56</sup> In spite of this the strike faded after five weeks and Minimum Wage Boards were established, in all the coalfields. The Boards had no power to fix wages but only to protect the position of miners working in "abnormal places" or prevented in some other way from earning the current district wage.<sup>57</sup>

After the settlement of the 1912 Miners' strike the London Transport Workers struck in June and July 1912. This strike began as official union action and was called as a result of trade unionists' attempt to extend the gains of 1911 [for example on the question of union control over the employment of casual labour, employers' resistance to any further union demands and refusal to recognise the N.T.W.F]. State intervention failed and a general strike was called which attracted support from London workers and their families and included huge demonstrations involving up to one thousand people.



The strike was characterised by widespread violent conflict between strikers, blacklegs and police. There were several gun battles, notably on the steamship 'City of Columbo' in Victoria docks at the end of July and similar conflicts erupted at the Royal Albert, West India, Surrey Commercial and Tilbury docks. However employers proved intractable, the strike did not attract significant sympathetic action from outside London since most transport workers had achieved higher wages and union bargaining rights as a result of the 1911 strikes and no common set of grievances existed to unite transport workers nationally. Also the strike leadership did not make practical preparations for national action - they assumed that 1911 would be repeated.<sup>58</sup> London strikers were thus isolated, food and money dwindled and they were starved into submission. Leaders called for a return to work and the strike was called off on July 27th 1912 although many workers initially refused to return to work.

#### **Summary and Conclusion.**

This chapter has highlighted the concerns of the state in managing the industrial conflict. The reports of the BOT emphasised that in the years immediately preceding 1910 'the capitalist had been able to secure a larger reward',<sup>59</sup> whilst the living standards of the working

class had fallen. Buxton of the BOT chided particularly intransigent employers and concluded in 1912 that 'looking back over the last twelve months probably no one, least of all any reasonable employer would deny that, taking into account the prosperity of the country, the expansion of trade and the increased cost of living, the increased remuneration thus wrung from employers was fully justified.'<sup>60</sup> Although the exploitation of the working class was highlighted, the aim of the Labour Department's activities in the field of conciliation was not to redress the balance in favour of the working class in industrial bargaining. The activities of the Labour Department were primarily aimed at preventing the development of worker organisation which could dislocate the country.

Investigations by the BOT into the industrial conflict of 1910-12 revealed that the aims of the workers were not revolutionary in the sense that there was no coherent radical agenda. Workers had adopted the methods of syndicalism "Direct Action" rather than its aims. Worker organisation was characterised by a new coherence and scale and the leaders of the established trade unions had lost power over their members. The scale and character of worker organisation in key industries constituted a potential "national danger" which could be realised through ill considered action on the part of the state. The more forcefully the state intervened the more likely it was to produce the

situation it aimed to prevent and yet to do nothing could have the same result. The conservatism which made trade union leaders valuable in defusing industrial conflict had become its focus. They had lagged behind new developments in working class organisation with the result that their members began to perceive them as a brake on their aspirations. Because of trade union leaders' refusal to embark on sympathetic strikes in an effort to protect their union funds and existence, they came to be seen as collaborators with the state and employers rather than representatives of what their members saw as their interests.

The state's response was to set up the Industrial Council which bought time during which existing machinery for curtailing disputes could be strengthened and directed with increased vigour towards disorganising the 'wonderful combination' which underpinned the threat.

The next two years until the outbreak of war were peaceful by comparison with the preceding two years. This is not to say that tranquillity had been restored just that there were no strikes on the same scale. However the formation of the Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen and transport workers' unions and continued unrest prompted Askwith to predict that 'Within a very short time there may be movements coming to a head of which recent events have been a small foreshadowing.'<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, because of the temper of organised labour, the state's management of industrial unrest remained qualitatively unaltered in this period and the majority of industrial disputes involving a strike or lockout were settled through existing conciliation machinery or through mediation by the BOT which set up conciliation machinery.<sup>62</sup> Askwith reported that this was having a beneficial effect and 'Trade after trade was gradually being organised on a basis of good relationships so far as the leaders of both sides were concerned. A network of associated employers and federated trade unions was spreading all over the country.'<sup>63</sup>

- 1 Halevy, 1952. Dangerfield, 1936.
- 2 Phillips, 1971.
- 3 Hunt, 1981.
- 4 Hobsbawm, 1984 p.277.
- 5 Hobsbawm, 1971 p5-21.
- 6 See Appendix 1.
- 7 Holton, 1976.
- 8 Dangerfield, 1936 p203.
- 9 PRO HO/45/10645/210615/9.
- 10 Quoted in Dangerfield, 1936 p.166.
- 11 Cole, 1948 p.330.
- 12 Holton, 1976.
- 13 Manchester Guardian August 1911.
- 14 Kendall, 1969 p.27.
- 15 Cole, 1948 p.335
- 16 PRO CAB 37/110/62. Report by the Board of Trade to the Cabinet 30th April 1912.
- 17 Cole, 1973 p.33.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 PRO CAB 37/107/70.1911. Report by President of the Board of Trade to the Cabinet 25th July. 1911.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 PRO CAB 37/107/70.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.

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26 In 1907 when unrest was threatened on the railways, George Askwith KC, who had played the role of arbitrator for the Labour Dept. since the passing of the Conciliation Act, was appointed full time conciliator for the BOT by LLOYD George then president of the BOT. In 1909 Askwith was made Comptroller General of the Commercial, Labour and Statistical Departments of the BOT. See - Davidson, 1985.

27 PRO CAB 37/107 Aug. 9th 1911. Buxton.

28 Ibid p3.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid p4.

31 Ibid p5

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid p8

34 Quoted in Charles, 1973 p.60.

35 PRO CAB 37/110/63. Report by the Board of Trade to the Cabinet. April 14th 1912.

36 See Bagwell, 1963.

37 PRO CAB 37/110/63.

38 Ibid

39 PRO CAB 37/110/62 Buxton, President of the Board of Trade April 1912.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 PRO CAB 37/110/63 Askwith April 1912.

- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Coal Mines (Minimum Wage) Act 1912.
- 47 PRO CAB 37/110/63.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 PRO CAB 37/110/62 Buxton April 1912.
- 55 Cole, 1948 p.340.
- 56 Holton, 1976 p.117.
- 57 Cole, 1948 p.341.
- 58 Holton, 1976 p.125.
- 59 PRO CAB 37/107/70.
- 60 PRO CAB 37/110/62.
- 61 Askwith, 1920 p.849.
- 62 Ibid p9.
- 63 Ibid p,356.

## Chapter 5

### Trade Unions and the Munitions Of War Act

#### Introduction

When war was declared on the 4th of August 1914 there were one hundred strikes known by the BOT to be in progress.<sup>1</sup> On the 25th of August a joint meeting took place of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, the management committee of the General Federation of Trade Unions and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party. At this meeting the cooperation of the labour movement was pledged to the war effort and it was resolved 'that an immediate effort be made to terminate all existing trade disputes whether strikes or lockouts and whenever difficulties arise during the war period, a serious attempt should be made by all concerned to reach an amicable settlement before resorting to a strike or lockout.'<sup>2</sup> By the end of August the number of strikes had been reduced to twenty.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that workers' patriotism had triumphed over their conflict with employers. It soon became obvious to the BOT however that this was misconceived. 'New ideas and new organisations among the workers had not disappeared in the confusion of the early days of the war; and when the first shock was over the public were apparently



astonished to find that men were very much what they had been before August 1914.'<sup>4</sup>

By June 1915 the BOT was forced to conclude that patriotism was losing to self interest and both workers and employers were taking advantage of the war situation. The shortage of labour, it was noted, was an increasingly serious problem which directly delayed production but it had effects 'perhaps even more serious. Practically any workman of any pretensions to skill at all in the engineering and shipbuilding trades has so little difficulty in finding work the moment he wants it that he has little economic motive left for remaining with his employer, if he is in any way dissatisfied, whether with good reason or without. On the other hand, the employers, constantly urged by the Government to increase their output, do not feel themselves really in a position to bargain with the men, and have indeed, in many cases owing to the terms of their contracts, little incentive to do so. The ordinary economic control of the individual workman has practically broken down.' This situation was made worse by 'the increase in prices, the rumour of large profits made by those who were regarded as enemies of the working class and the distrust of established authorities which survived the excitement of war - all this had developed into a movement opposing the generally accepted policy of the Government and the officials of the trade unions ... The result is that to

a very considerable extent the men are out of the control of both employers and their own leaders.<sup>5</sup>

To understand how the situation confronting the BOT arose and the strategies which were developed in the wake of these difficulties this section will outline the sequence of events which preceded it. In keeping with the overall emphasis of the thesis this chapter will focus on the relationship between the state and the trade unions and between the trade union leadership and the rank and file in the management of industrial conflict

#### **Industrial Unrest at the Outbreak of War**

Once war was declared the growing need for recruits to the armed services quickly produced a shortage of labour, especially skilled labour in the engineering trades, and a shortage of munitions<sup>6</sup>. By October 1914 the engineering trades had lost 12.2% of their pre-war male workers; by February 1915 16.4%; by July 1915 19.5%.<sup>7</sup> The worsening labour situation led to the Shell Conference on 21st December 1914 at which the BOT proposed that disputes should be settled by some agreed form without stoppage of work by strike or lockout and that trade union rules and practices which restricted output should be temporarily suspended for the duration of the war to allow for dilution.

The BOT outlined these proposals in a letter to both the engineering employers and the ASE in January 1915 and asked that they now resolve the labour shortage on this basis. On 4th February 1915, with still no agreement reached, the Prime Minister, Asquith, appointed a committee (composed of Askwith of the BOT, Sir Francis Hopwood of the Admiralty and Sir George Gibb of the War Office with HJ Wilson, former registrar of the Industrial Council, as secretary). This committee was called the Committee on Production in Engineering and Shipbuilding and its brief was to obtain the agreement of the engineering and shipbuilding workers to the above proposals.<sup>8</sup> The Committee's intervention resulted in the Shells and Fuses Agreement in March 1915 which provided for the introduction of unskilled labour, including women, on jobs reserved for skilled men in the engineering industry<sup>9</sup> but with the conditions that women who took over men's jobs were to get the rate for the job, (to protect the male rate at the end of the war not to establish the rate for the job, regardless of sex as a basic principle) the agreement was to last for the war only and women would be the first to be discharged when the labour shortage was over.<sup>10</sup>

In early 1915 however labour unrest began to escalate once more.<sup>11</sup> The Committee on Production recommended that the government take action to prevent all strikes

and lockouts on war work and to have disputes where parties could not reach a settlement referred to an independent tribunal for arbitration. This recommendation was accepted and the next day 21st February 1915 the Committee on Production became the arbitration tribunal.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst trade union leaders and the state had agreed on the need to implement labour controls however, trade union members proved less amenable. In January 1915 only ten disputes had been known to the Labour Dept., of the BOT, but by March there were seventy four fresh disputes. In March 1915 trade union leaders in munitions asked the state to help them secure their members acceptance of the proposed labour controls and a conference was called to discuss the issue.<sup>13</sup> An agreement was reached between the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Lloyd George), the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the leaders of the thirty six unions involved in war production that trade union restrictive practices would be abandoned, dilution would be introduced and strikes would be avoided by means of arbitration. This agreement, called the Treasury Agreement, was reached in exchange for the pledge that trade union practices would be restored after the war, that employers' profits would be restricted during the war and was based on the Shells and Fuses Agreement. The Miners' leaders were not party to this agreement and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers held out for

better terms.<sup>14</sup> Without the ASE this agreement had little value and a week later a Supplementary Treasury Agreement was drawn up which was more acceptable to the ASE. It contained additional clauses stating that trade practices were only to be relaxed for the war period and protection for skilled workers 'in the case of the introduction of new inventions which were not in existence in the pre war period the class of workmen to be employed on this work shall be determined according to the practice prevailing before the war in the case of the class of work most nearly analogous.'<sup>15</sup>

The agreement still did not eliminate unofficial strikes which began to proliferate after it was signed. In the three months following the agreement strikes increased affecting more than 84,000 workers and involving the loss of over 525,000 working days.<sup>16</sup> These strikes were concentrated on the Clyde where industrial unrest had begun to mount even before the Treasury agreement was signed or discussed with the trade unions. On the 16th of February 1915 events had crystallised in a general strike among Clyde engineers over a wage issue. The strike ended on the 4th of March after a Government ultimatum to the strikers and the Committee on Production stepped in as arbitrator in advance of its official role as arbitration committee - the strikers were given half of their original wage demand.

The attempt to prevent strikes and implement dilution by voluntary agreement had failed. These had been agreed to in theory but strikes had broken out and dilution was still the subject of protracted negotiations between all parties. Llewellyn-Smith of the Labour Department of the BOT put the matter succinctly 'The difficulty ... is that the workmen, though engaged in armaments work, still feel themselves to be working essentially for private employers with whom they have only a "cash nexus" and that in the present circumstances a cash nexus is quite inadequate to secure control.'

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In a report circulated to the War Office at the beginning of June, Llewellyn-Smith reviewed labour policy to date and opted for compulsion. 'My considered judgment is in favour of immediate legislation, as I am convinced that any further attempt on merely voluntary lines unsupported by legislative enactment will only break down and lose valuable time. I am glad to find that these views are shared by Sir George Askwith and Mr Mitchell of the Chief Industrial Commissioner's Department.'

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Llewellyn-Smith proposed to take the Treasury Agreement of March 17th 1915 as the starting point for legislation saying that although this had to a large extent covered the ground it had been rendered largely inoperative because trade union leaders had found

themselves unable to carry their rank and file with them by voluntary persuasion and the Government had found themselves unable to complete by purely voluntary agreement their undertaking to control the profits of the principal contractors. In the event, as the next section will show, the provisions of the legislation focused on the growing strength of the working class.

#### **The Munitions of War Act.**

The BOT noted that during 1915 the cost of living had begun to rise and wage increases began to be granted of varying amounts, on different bases in different trades and in different parts of the country. A sort of wage anarchy had set in as employers with and without government contracts began to bid against each other in offering higher wages to attract and keep skilled workers. It was emphasised that the success of the war effort depended on keeping skilled workers on Government munitions work. In response to this crisis Llewellyn-Smith proposed as a form of control, the strengthening of the Defence of the Realm Regulation prohibiting employers from holding out inducements to workmen to change their employment.<sup>19</sup> In view of the very wide prevalence of this evil, I am inclined to

think that we should tighten up the Regulation and it may be necessary to take the opportunity of the [MOW] Bill to make sure it is not "ultra vires". Without going into details, I suggest the line followed might be that, in the case of workmen engaged on Government work, no new employer should take them on within a certain period of their leaving such employment without either a certificate from the previous employer that he consents or a certificate from some tribunal such as a Court of Referees that this refusal was unreasonably withheld'.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time it was realised that the success of this policy depended on the cooperation of munitions workers - 'a great and concerted voluntary effort will also be needed'.<sup>21</sup> This in turn depended on the substitution among them 'of a motive not of a purely economic character.' If workers in munitions were to accept these new demands it was necessary to appeal to their patriotism. Patriotism might be encouraged and the shortage of skilled labour eased, in Llewellyn Smith's view, by 'the raising by voluntary enrolment of an "Industrial Army" of munition workers with some such title as the King's Munitions Corps.'<sup>22</sup>

Although they expressed themselves largely in favour of these initiatives 'as a penultimate measure in the hope of avoiding industrial conscription,' officials of the War Office thought they would not address the problem



of recruitment or increased arms production. In this view trade union leaders were the main obstacle in the way of further recruitment and increased industrial production - they should be bought off for the duration of the war and replaced by factory managements.<sup>23</sup> For the Labour Department of the BOT however the goodwill of trade union leaders was indispensable. Llewellyn Smith had earlier warned the government that 'nothing but disaster would attend any attempt to rush the position by a frontal attack on union policy, or by any Government action which would give the unions the impression that the Government in this matter were acting as the mouthpiece of the employers.'<sup>24</sup> Of the industrialists at the War Office he noted 'On labour matters ... Girouard and Booth are amateurs ... I doubt if either has any idea of the pitfalls in any "new labour policy".'<sup>25</sup> In any case as employers their primary objective was not the national interest but competition with each other in search of individual profit.<sup>26</sup>

Amid escalating industrial unrest and alleged shortages of munitions <sup>27</sup> the Ministry of Munitions was set up headed by Lloyd George on the 9th of June 1915. The Ministry of Munitions was organised in separate sections including a Labour Department, whose personnel and policy were transplanted from the BOT.<sup>28</sup> Immediately after the formation of the Ministry of Munitions Lloyd George held talks with the unions which

had signed the Treasury Agreement about giving statutory effect to the latter. The unions agreed and the Munitions of War Act was passed on the 2nd of July 1915. However the Munitions of War Act went much farther than the Treasury Agreement. The Act gave the state extensive powers over workers in controlled industries. The state now controlled their mobility, pay and conditions of work. The Act provided that for a period of six weeks no employment was to be given to a worker who left work in munitions without a leaving certificate from his employer. This made it difficult for workers to increase their wages by moving to employers offering higher rates. Strikes and lockouts in all industries engaged in war work became illegal and all disputes were to be referred to the BOT for arbitration. Since there was now a boom in the munitions industry and employers had no use for the lockout, workers bore the brunt of this regulation and now had no way of improving their wages except through the long process of a tribunal. The Act did not forbid incitement to strike but under the Defence of the Realm Acts (regulation 42) amended in November 1915, it was an offence 'to impede, delay, or restrict the production, repair or transport of war material or any other work necessary for the successful prosecution of the war'.<sup>29</sup>

Under the Act 6,000 Controlled Establishments were ultimately created and Munitions Tribunals were

established as the agency of enforcement of the Act. In addition, it provided for the control of employers' profits so that the restriction of trade union liberties should benefit the state and not employers.<sup>30</sup>

#### **The MOW Act and Industrial Unrest.**

The Munitions Act met worker resistance almost immediately. Thirteen days after it was passed 200,000 miners stopped work in South Wales. An agreement between miners and coalowners had expired and negotiations for a new one had broken down. The BOT had been conducting negotiations but the miners had rejected the peace formula suggested. On the 13th July a Royal Proclamation was issued under the MOW Act making it an offence to take part in a strike in the South Wales coalfields and setting up a General Munitions Tribunal in that area. This exacerbated the strike and on the 20th July the Minister of Munitions and the President of the BOT (Lloyd George and W.Runciman) went to Cardiff and ended the strike by granting practically all the strikers' claims.<sup>31</sup>

The storm centre of industrial unrest in 1914-16 however, was the Clyde Valley where munitions production was concentrated and where, from the outbreak of war, workers found themselves under increasing pressure to accept dilution. On the 25th of

July 1915 coppersmiths at Fairfield's shipyard struck. In early July the management of Fairfield's had applied for and was granted permission from the Glasgow and West of Scotland Armaments Committee to substitute plumbers on work usually done by coppersmiths. The Coppersmith's union had been reluctant to approve of this move but was told by management that since the firm was a controlled establishment it would do it anyway. After the annual works holiday the coppersmiths struck over the initiative but were subsequently fined only a very small amount by a Munitions Tribunal and the Coppersmiths' union showed its support by paying the fines.<sup>32</sup>

On the 26th of August Fairfields' workers struck again over the dismissal of two shipwrights for slacking. The latter had been sent on their way with leaving certificates which bore the inscription 'not attending to work.' (The leaving certificate rule was increasingly used by Clyde employers to discipline workers. By threatening to dismiss workers without leaving certificates, which would effectively mean they would be unemployed for at least six weeks, employers could force workers to take on dirty low paid and unpopular work and keep skilled labour regardless of the availability of work elsewhere. <sup>33</sup>) After a meeting the shipyard director had reluctantly agreed to remove the offending phrase but not to reinstate the workers and 426 shipwrights struck. The Ministry of Munitions

was informed and a week later twenty six of the strikers were prosecuted (mostly shop stewards). Shortly after the coppermiths' hearing Lloyd George had told the shipbuilding employers that the Ministry would consider prosecuting 'in suitable cases ... where we could make sure we could make a real example.'<sup>34</sup> At the shipwrights' hearing fifteen men pleaded guilty to contravening the MOW Act and two of those who pleaded not guilty were convicted and fined ten pounds each with twenty one days to pay. Three of the men refused to pay and were imprisoned and this provoked a swell of unrest among Clyde workers and threats of a general strike.

It should be noted that unrest on the Clyde predated the MOW Act and there had been considerable trouble over swingeing rent increases imposed by landlords taking advantage of the housing shortage made worse by the influx of munitions workers into the region. In the summer of 1915 the Clyde Workers Committee had been formed out of the strike committee which had coordinated the February 1915 strike over wages and the attempt to introduce Taylorism in engineering on the Clyde. This strike marked the beginning of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee movement which was later to spread across the country. This movement grew out of the engineering workshop which was organised around shop stewards and their committees. For some years the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had

organised its membership in disparate factories through a system of shop stewards appointed by, and responsible to, District Committees (also known as Vigilance Committees) of the union. In the years leading up to the First World War however, a rift developed between the District Committees and the shop stewards such that they became semi-independent of the former and were appointed by the rank and file.<sup>35</sup> However it was only during the war that an independent shop stewards' movement developed outside of existing trade union organisation and evolved its own policy based on the theory of class struggle, the abolition of capitalism, the reorganisation of trade unionism and workers' control of industry.<sup>36</sup>

The Clyde Workers' Committee leadership was dominated by members of the influential Socialist Labour Party. The SLP had the most consistently revolutionary outlook of any political party active on Clydeside at that time. Members of the SLP were adherents of Daniel DeLeon's Industrial Unionism.<sup>37</sup> The influence of the SLP was expressed among the leadership of the CWC in its awareness of the need for one union in each industry and for political action.

This was the backdrop to industrial unrest on the Clyde and the leaders of some of the strikes, with the exception of the rent strikes and the strike at Lang's of Johnstone, (see below) were members of the CWC. The

CWC was not against dilution per se, believing that it was an inevitable step in the evolution of capitalism such that it was an illusion to think (as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers believed) that the pre-war situation of labour could be restored. In adhering to Industrial Unionism the CWC was, theoretically, against barriers of craft, sex and race and sought workers' control of industry as the only way workers' interests could be protected. Of all the agreements negotiated concerning dilution on war work the Clyde Workers' Agreement, negotiated by the CWC, won the best terms (equal pay or the rate for the job) for dilutees who were largely women. However there is no evidence that this was done for women workers but to ensure that women could not be used to undercut men.<sup>38</sup>

The Cabinet became concerned on receiving reports on the situation<sup>39</sup> from the Labour Dept., of the Ministry of Munitions. Lord Balfour of Burleigh and Lynden Macassey were appointed 'to enquire into the causes and circumstances of the apprehended differences affecting munitions workers in the Clyde district'<sup>40</sup>. However, Balfour and Macassey had no authority to release the imprisoned workers and union leaders of the Clyde engineering and shipbuilding industry sent a telegram to the Ministry of Munitions demanding the release of the workers and a reply within three days. The union leaders met Lloyd George and it was decided that the

men would be released and the unions could pay the fines.

The state of mind of Clyde workers was characterised by Macassey as 'universal irritation, unveiled hostility to the Act and corroding suspicion of every clause under the Act. From this mental disposition, all the present unrest is begotten' and is not 'the spontaneous product of the workmen's own cogitation' but the work of 'two or three local trade union officials who deliberately and for their own purposes, circulated only too effectively, untrue statements as to the origin of the Act and garbled, misleading versions of its effect.' These officials did this for their own advancement (the prize was the General Secretaryship of the ASE<sup>41</sup>) and did not expect such a powerful response from their members. The officials lost control and were swept along by the tide of resentment and 'soon the crowd overtook their local leaders. Now these particular officials, to justify their existence, are forced to inflate and paint as crowning tyrannies of the Act, every pettifogging complaint that in peacetime would not have secured report by a shop steward to his union local branch.'<sup>42</sup>

**The MOW Act and dilution.**

Towards the end of 1915 information received from controlled establishments led the Labour Department to



conclude that although the suspension of restrictions and the dilution of labour was taking place, it was taking place too slowly for the necessities of the situation. Some firms were making changes but many more were not. In explanation some employers asserted that they did not need to abolish trade union restrictions (they had managed to increase output in other ways) and had not therefore attempted to do so. A number were willing to make changes but the threat of worker resistance prevented them. Some unions (notably the Boilermakers) would not work with non unionists. In short there was a great deal of conservatism among both employers and workers.<sup>43</sup>

In addition the War Munitions Volunteer scheme (formerly the King's Munitions Corps) had failed to live up to expectations and the total number of skilled men transferred from private work to munitions was only 12000 <sup>44</sup> It was decided that this laid to rest the theory, favoured by the trade unions, that the absolute shortage of skilled men could be met by shifting skilled men from one shop to another. Further, the policy of releasing skilled men from the army had proved disappointing <sup>45</sup> as had the importation of skilled men from the Dominions and other countries.<sup>46</sup> As early as December 1914 the Board of Trade had been considering importing labour from outside Britain. Although some trade unions had suggested this, in practice it had proved problematic not least because

trade unionists would not work with imported labour while their own workmates were recruited to fight in the trenches<sup>47</sup>. Of the bid to introduce coloured labour it was noted 'the trade unions constantly and successfully set their faces against the attempt.'<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Munitions had not pressed the unions on this issue and opted for segregation by setting up separate establishments staffed exclusively by foreign labour as at Birtley in Durham which consisted exclusively of Belgian workers.<sup>49</sup>

In July 1915 a National Registration Act had been passed and on the 15th of August 1915 a census was taken to provide information as to the size and skills of the maximum possible workforce in Britain. From this exercise it was concluded that no more skilled labour could be recruited, that Britain could not expect to produce munitions with male labour while maintaining an army of continental size, and without dilution it would be impossible to raise the 1,500,000 men thought necessary for the 1916 campaign.<sup>50</sup>

Lloyd George addressed a conference of the executives of the engineering unions in September 1915 and told them that since all other expedients had failed, only dilution could prevent labour conscription or the destruction of the nation.<sup>51</sup> He assured the engineering unions that their interests would be safeguarded if dilution was accepted and suggested the appointment of

a committee of trade union representatives, engineering employers and representatives of the Ministry of Munitions to help implement dilution. This Committee was to draw up a comprehensive scheme for dilution which would increase the scope and numbers of women employed in a way acceptable to men and women workers. The Central Labour Supply Committee was duly formed and at its first meeting on the 22nd of September 1915 it dutifully agreed that dilution was the only solution to the labour shortage and a directive known as CE 1 was issued to all controlled establishments instructing them to implement dilution on the 13th of October 1915.<sup>52</sup> This directive laid down that no worker in munitions production was to be employed on any work requiring less skill than he possessed. Where there was a shortage of manpower invalid soldiers, army rejects and women and children were to be introduced and the substitution of unskilled for skilled workers was to be achieved by the introduction of automatic machines and the subdivision of skilled tasks into their simplest processes.<sup>53</sup> Following this directive the 'L' Circulars were issued - a series of five circulars dealing with wages and general policies with regard to the implementation of dilution in controlled establishments. These circulars included recommendations on which jobs were 'within the limits of women's capabilities,' on health and welfare and minimum wages for women. They recommended that dilution be implemented only after consultation with

the workers and clear explanation by management of proposed changes. The adoption of these recommendations was however optional and although they were implemented in munitions factories directly controlled by government they were ignored by employers who subcontracted work from the government as well as by some government departments, notably the Admiralty. Circulars L2 and L3 respectively recommended a £1 minimum wage for women workers and a minimum for substituted male labour. It was not until February 1916 that these circulars were made mandatory under pressure from the ASE.<sup>54</sup>

In advance of a proposed visit to the Tyne and the Clyde by the Minister of Munitions to expedite dilution, Lynden Macassey (arbitrator for the Labour Department) visited the Tyne in early December 1915. His aim was to meet the District Committee of the ASE 'to force the issue as to whether or not the men of the district would accept the scheme of dilution agreed upon by the government.' On arrival, however, he found the atmosphere such that 'it was inadvisable to force any issue, especially as I felt that by delaying matters for a few days and by careful handling the question could be satisfactorily settled.' In spite of 'careful handling' Macassey found that workers on the Tyne remained unconvinced of the need to increase the output of munitions. For Macassey this was 'merely an excuse not to give up their restrictions ... there was

no question that the munitions were necessary and 'every workshop must be diluted to the full.' For Macassey this was necessary not only to increase the flow of munitions but also to discipline skilled workers in the engineering works who had such power that the government, their employers and their own leaders were careful not to upset them. Macassey pointed to 'the lamentable and disgraceful timekeeping which takes place in these works. I believe I am right in saying that between 30% and 60% of the men in many cases do not turn up on Monday at all ... The men are better off than they have ever been, and whether they are fully employed or underemployed, the wages they are receiving now are higher than they have ever received before .' In Macassey's view 'dilution should be put into operation with all possible speed and force since [the workers] do not have a leg to stand on ... the way the government have met their point of view is far more generous than might have been expected when compared with the great national crisis.' Macassey's experience led him to conclude that while Lloyd George's proposed visit could be beneficial it would be insufficient to implement dilution. Macassey had been informed by the workers' leaders that although they were convinced that dilution was necessary the workers would not believe them such that 'definite and strong measures will have to be taken in any case where the men object to their restrictions for the moment being done away with.'<sup>55</sup>

Similarly on the Clyde, Paterson (Chief Labour Officer) reported that in spite of the MOW Act, 'trade union restrictions were being as firmly insisted upon as ever they were and it was hopeless to expect employers to take any action in the direction suggested (in CE1) until the Ministry of Munitions had brought the necessary pressure to bear on trade unions to secure the waiving in practice - and not merely on paper - of their restrictions.'<sup>56</sup> Employers on the Clyde were convinced that the Ministry of Munitions knew the hollowness and insincerity of trade union action but was unwilling to pressure the unions preferring to let individual employers take the brunt of union opposition. Employers were determined not to be used in this way by the Ministry. It was emphasised that as far as Clyde employers were concerned the Ministry's position had been amply demonstrated at Lang's of Johnstone where 'The Ministry allowed the ASE to dictate the terms of settlement and this had resulted in the evaporation of all interest in the question of the dilution of labour.'<sup>57</sup> Paterson emphasised that he had not discussed the employers' views or the great scope for dilution in works across the Clyde with the local officials of the trade unions because 'I am sure that no purpose could be served by consultation with the local officials of trade unions. The matter would merely be referred to the central executives of various unions and much valuable time would be lost.' Like the report on the situation with regard to dilution on the

Tyne, this report was intended to acquaint the Minister of Munitions with the position before he went to Glasgow to meet the shop stewards with a view to expediting the implementation of dilution there. Paterson concluded his report with the opinion that no appreciable increase in dilution would be achieved in this way. 'The atmosphere which is essential to permit of such a movement yielding any result does not exist, and the chances of any movement might well be likened to an effort to advance and sustain an advance against a wall of poisoned gas.'<sup>58</sup>

The reference to Lang's of Johnstone in this report at the expense of the other disputes in progress at the time stems from the fact that this firm was a major machine-tool manufacturer and had been something of a test case for the Ministry. At this firm notice was given of the intention to introduce female labour at the end of August 1915. This was made impossible until November because of lengthy negotiations with the central and local officials of the ASE. The attempt to introduce women at Lang's in August 1915 led to a protracted dispute with the ASE which eventually resulted in a heavily qualified agreement and the introduction of only a few women.<sup>59</sup>

The dispute at Lang's was singled out by the Labour Department as characterising the key obstacles to the implementation of dilution viz. the provision requiring

notice to workmen of proposed changes, divisions within and between different levels of trade union organisation and hostility to the introduction of women workers. These factors were practically a guarantee of resistance and unrest with the result that some employers avoided attempting to implement change. Also some employers shared workers' attitudes towards changes especially with regard to the influx of women workers 'it is no use proposing dilution of labour when competent unskilled male labour cannot be obtained for work which would be unsuitable for women.'<sup>60</sup>

In summary the trade unions had agreed in theory to cooperate but it was recognised by the state that given union officials' need to retain credibility with their members which was manifest in their insistence on consultation and agreement at both local and national level they didn't intend to cooperate actively in dilution and so it had proved. In the original draft of the Munitions of War Act the provision requiring notice to the workmen concerned and local consultation over the introduction of changes was omitted, it had been reinserted after talks with union leaders. This now stood in the way of further dilution because asking workers whether women workers could be introduced or whether other changes could be introduced 'practically means inviting them to raise difficulties, and this they do. It also means inviting them to ask for evidence that the change proposed is necessary. The



extent to which this may go is illustrated by the fact that at Elswick (Armstrong Whitworth & Co.) it was actually suggested by one of the men that before dilution was permitted they should be allowed to go to the Front and ascertain whether the guns alleged to be required were really needed.'<sup>61</sup>

At Smith's in Coventry and Manchester, after consultation failed, the Ministry instructed the firm to introduce women and it did so whereupon the men struck in defiance of their union. The union managed to get the men back to work and the women stayed at work but there was still opposition to women in other Manchester machine shops. It was concluded that in practice consultation usually meant stalemate since 'Consultation unfortunately means, as a rule, consulting both the local workmen and trade union leaders and it sometimes happens that when one is favourable the other is unfavourable, and vice versa.'<sup>62</sup>

#### **The State's Response.**

The state assumed responsibility for the implementation of dilution at the beginning of 1916 and mounted a campaign to enforce dilution firstly on the Clyde. Responsibility for the implementation of dilution was centralised in 1916 with the formation of the Dilution

Section of the Labour Dept., which was to replace the Central Munitions Labour Supply Committee now seen as slow and cumbersome.<sup>63</sup> Lloyd George spearheaded the campaign on the Clyde but only succeeded in aggravating unrest and hardening resistance when "The Forward" was suppressed under DORA Reg.51 on the 4th of January 1916 for attempting to print a report of his Christmas Day speech thought likely to impede the progress of dilution.

On the 17th of January a letter was sent by the Chief Labour Officer of the Ministry of Munitions to Ministry headquarters in London which acknowledged that, while there was no evidence of their direct obstruction of dilution (they were willing to negotiate), the shop stewards focused public attention on them and this obscured the underlying problem which was the refusal of skilled workers generally to cooperate in dilution. They had been able to hide behind the more public activities of the shop stewards. If progress was to be made this buffer would have to be removed but only after care had been taken not to escalate the situation or present the government in a bad light. 'Below I give the names of the gentlemen whose removal would go a long way towards helping production, viz; Kirkwood, Gallacher, Messer, Muir, McManus, Clark, McLean, and Petroff. I am afraid that the removal of almost any one of these men (with the possible exception of McLean and Petroff) would at once cause a big strike. When a

strike takes place, it is desirable that the Government should have the best case possible to present to the public. Ultimately it will be forced to give some reasons for the removal of these men, and it would have to be disclosed that action had been taken on general statements, unsupported by real evidence of a convincing nature. A very much cleaner issue would be a strike against the enforcement of the dilution of labour, as the Government then would be in a position of asking the skilled men of the country to allow their skill to be used to the best advantage, and the public opinion would be overwhelmingly against the men. If therefore, definite orders for the dilution of labour are to be given, I think it would be better to delay consideration of the question of removing the men out of the district.<sup>64</sup>

On the 22nd of January the Clyde Dilution Commission was appointed to introduce dilution on the Clyde. Shortly after its arrival in Glasgow on the 29th of January there was a strike of 2000 munitions workers in a number of CWC controlled factories over the suppression of "The Worker" - the CWC paper - for an article entitled 'Should the Workers Arm?' The article concluded that they should not. Nevertheless on the 7th February William Gallacher and John Muir (leaders of the CWC) and Walter Bell (the printer of their journal) were arrested on sedition charges. The strikes ended when the men were released on bail (it was not until

the 14th of April that the men were tried and imprisoned).

A memorandum from the Clyde to the Ministry of Munitions on the 9th of February however, reported fresh activity from the CWC and the increasing weakness of the trade unions. 'Its tentacles are now fairly widespread and are growing. However the committee has not effective control over the workers in more than five or six shops. The outstanding feature of the position is that the Official Trade Unions in the district are in many works now wholly unable to speak for their members. Agreements arrived at between the Commissioners and the local Trade Union officials or even the shop stewards in the works are promptly repudiated by the instigation of the emissaries of the Clyde Workers' Committee. The authority of the official trade unions in the Clyde district is being steadily undermined and will be inevitably ruined unless the Unions quickly rise to an intelligent appreciation of their position and exert themselves to recover their waning control over their members.'<sup>65</sup>

Matters came to a head on the Clyde in March 1916 when David Kirkwood, Convenor of shop stewards at Parkhead Forge resigned as convenor after the management refused him access to a new department in which women were at work under the dilution scheme. The Parkhead workers struck and were soon joined by workers in other

factories. Kirkwood and shop stewards, James Haggerty, Samuel Shields, Robert Wainwright and James Messer were deported on March the 24th 1916 and a further three stewards on the 28th of March under the Defence of the Realm Act. Under the threat of fines and further deportations and in the absence of its leadership, the strike was broken.

The CWC rightly challenged the state's justifications for its actions by pointing out that as convenor Kirkwood had the customary right to enter any shop in which a dispute was in progress, that there was no elaborate plot to stop work on any type of gun vitally needed for the army, that the CWC had not embarked on any definite 'policy to hold up the production of the most important munitions of war' and that the CWC had no deliberate policy of calling men out on strike and had not called them out in the above case.<sup>66</sup>

The evidence confirms Hinton's view that the first priority of the state was to break through the purely craft resistance to dilution typified by the workers at Lang's and the ASE executive and that the undermining and subsequent destruction of the CWC was by no means an incidental effect of the state's dilution campaign. The CWC was recognised as a danger to the war effort and to the maintenance of social stability in its own right. However it is inaccurate to claim as Hinton does, that it was only after dilution was well under

way on the Clyde and conservative and craft resistance had been effectively broken, that the state mounted its premeditated offensive against the Committee itself<sup>67</sup>. The state felt that progress in dilution could only be made if the CWC was removed and the ASE publicly revealed as responsible. For some time the state had been aware that it was the official trade union movement which had persistently dragged its feet over dilution. The dilution campaign had begun with the Treasury Agreement in March 1915 but the introduction of women did not begin in earnest until January 1916. It has been shown that there were many reasons for this delay including friction between the Ministry of Munitions and the Ministries whose functions it supplanted, and also the obstructiveness, incompetence or conservatism of many engineering employers, but the main reason was 'the remarkably successful rearguard action fought by the Executive of the ASE against the dilution to which it was nominally pledged.'<sup>68</sup>

On the 31st of December 1915, at a meeting between a deputation from the ASE, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Munitions, the Minister of Munitions challenged the ASE on its resistance to some aspects of dilution especially the provisions surrounding the employment of women workers saying 'You see we have had an agreement since March and it really has not been carried out. You will all admit that. We simply cannot produce the stuff unless you do it ... It has not

arisen through the Executive's fault. You have played the game right through, but you have men behind you who put forward fresh demands. They say "we are not going to do it unless you do so and so" and then we are confronted with another difficulty ... We never seem to get to a firm agreement. It makes such a difference when one is considering whether to make a concession or not. Is it really a firm agreement?'<sup>69</sup>

The Prime Minister felt that the solution was in the hands of the union leaders whose duty was to exert 'all their force to remove these suspicions and to encourage the men, and indeed, I will not say coerce, but bring every influence they can to bear upon them.' The Minister of Munitions professed himself sympathetic to the Executive's point of view 'I know your reasons and you know you are getting very big concessions for your people' but concluded with a barely concealed threat 'what I am afraid of is that you will say, "Yes we will accept this" and then your men begin again. They do not like dilution and therefore they are always trying to find some sort of objection to it. They will find another and we shall be no nearer the end. If so I shall have to put another proposal before the Prime Minister to deal with the situation. That is a ghastly thing to contemplate.'<sup>70</sup>

This threat notwithstanding, there were limits to the state's actions in respect of dilution. Reid argues

that these limits were set by the law, public opinion and internal divisions in addition to the official trade unions. The only compulsory powers available to the state were under the DORA which allowed it to deport disruptive individuals from problem areas or to prosecute individuals for sedition and treason. It did not have the power to force through unpopular industrial policies against generalised resistance. The limits set on state action by public opinion were such that whenever the question of compulsion was raised there were outcries from the general public, members of parliament etc. This was reinforced by the state's own propaganda which painted the war as a war against dictatorship which made difficult the adoption of authoritarian measures. Internal policy differences between state departments especially between the Admiralty and the Ministry of Munitions reduced the latter's room for manoeuvre, resulted in the reduction of the amount of skilled labour available for munitions production and began to undermine the dilution campaign as a whole by setting bad precedents.<sup>71</sup>

Reid's analysis rightly undermines the view that state policies conformed to the interests of employers citing the testimony of officials of the Labour Department who refused to delegate labour policy to employers on the grounds of conflicting interests and lack of expertise and by employers themselves who thought the Ministry was on the side of the trade unions against them. As we



have seen the notion that the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions was biased against hard line employers and in favour of moderate trade unionism was a charge which had been levelled against the pre war Labour Department of the Board of Trade.

This charge gained credibility from the fact that virtually no attempt was made to legally enforce dilution even where the Munitions Acts gave power to do so and, even though it was recognised that consultation with workers representatives meant modification, unrest and delay, dilution proceeded mainly through conferences and agreements with the trade unions. There were practically no occasions when the Munitions of War Act was used during unrest on the Clyde to enforce dilution. The Ministry of Munitions claimed that dilution could only proceed peacefully if labour's consent and cooperation were secured. In all cases dilution agreements included clauses to safeguard the standard wage rate and to restore male workers' places and trade union rules after the war.<sup>72</sup> By February 1916 the Labour Department was forced to concede victory to the ASE, 'The Amalgamated Society of Engineers have pledged themselves at intervals from March onwards to cooperate with the Government in the dilution of labour and the prevention of strikes on munitions work. They have continually gone back on their agreements at a moment's notice, that is to say have themselves gone on strike.'<sup>73</sup>

It was not until February 1916 that the ASE, on condition that the state made circulars L2 and L3 legal and mandatory, agreed to accept the scheme of dilution 'and cooperate actively therein.'<sup>74</sup> By July 1916 the number of women employed in munitions establishments had risen from 2.6% in 1914 to 26%.<sup>75</sup> In December 1916 it was noted however that the extent to which processes performed by these women were identical or even similar to those done by men prior to the war was very limited and in the case of skilled work it was almost non-existent. Also a considerable amount of semi-skilled work was being done by women but this was under the supervision of men and largely confined to repetition work.<sup>76</sup> The new and highly automatic machinery which had been introduced into munitions factories (to enable the introduction of women on work previously the province of skilled men) had largely resulted in the operation of the machines too being the province of skilled men.

While it is difficult to disentangle the extent to which gender contributed to unrest on the Clyde it was acknowledged as one of the main factors in resistance to dilution by the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions <sup>77</sup>. This particular aspect of resistance to dilution was seen as understandable and concessions were made to compensate. 'Every argument was used that could possibly be thought of to persuade the men to

allow the introduction of female labour without causing trouble.<sup>78</sup> The introduction of women was clearly presented as an unavoidable temporary expedient, work areas were rigidly defined as "mens' work" or "womens' work", women were to be paid men's wages when employed on men's work (although this became contentious when the Minister of Munitions moved the goal posts by regrading jobs<sup>79</sup>). Resistance to the introduction of women by skilled workers, whether tactical or principled, unlike wages or calls for a new social order, evoked support across class barriers and contributed to skilled workers success in modifying the impact of dilution. However, as the next section will show, the factor which contributed most to skilled workers' ability to resist dilution was the shop stewards' organisation. The significance of the shop stewards organisation was that it was a shift away from responsible unionism which had made substantial gains for and many converts among previously conservative unionists. It had done this by apparently repudiating the structure and methods of responsible trade unionism. The constituents of this "power for" will be set out below in order to illustrate why the shop stewards drew the state's fire and why concessions were made to the trade unions which modified the impact of the state's efforts to implement dilution.

#### **The Shop Stewards Movement.**

The characteristics of the shop stewards' organisation which made it a power for skilled workers are amply described by Haydu<sup>80</sup> who begins by noting that the shop stewards were well placed to play a central role in wartime unrest. Before the war they had assumed responsibility for regulating work rules and piece rates - tasks which had greatly expanded during the war with state sponsored changes in production techniques. Stewards defended workers' interests in dilution, bargaining with managers over specific manning arrangements, wage rates for upgraded workers and the implementation of general state regulations.

The shop steward's role in preserving direct control and freedom of action for rank and file engineers also assumed far greater importance amid compromises made by union leaders and centralised union/state collaboration in handling grievances. Through organisation at shop floor level engineers reclaimed the right to strike which had been given up by union leaders and proscribed by law. This enabled them to focus the state's attention on local grievances. The trade unions had abdicated their traditional responsibilities and at the same time freed unofficial action from national discipline. Jobs were easy to find, the state intervened to settle disputes, unions had agreed to suspend strike action - there were no effective sanctions against unconstitutional behaviour. 'The forces that before the war had kept rank and file

protest relatively routine and circumscribed were thus suspended.<sup>81</sup>

The SSM also extended the pre war tendency for workplace organisation to ignore craft divisions. The MOW Act suspended customary demarcation rules in factories. Distinctions between craft workers remained intact but because craft workers faced common problems on the job and could not call on their respective unions, they had their own interest in common organisation at work. This organisation often involved members of different unions electing a common departmental steward to act on their behalf. In other cases stewards chosen by workers of given crafts formed joint works committees to deal collectively with management. 'Such stewards and committees thus had powers and constituencies that bypassed established trade societies.'<sup>82</sup> Further, elected stewards negotiated on behalf of all workers in their department regardless of grade. This is not to say that divisions between workers of different skill, sex or race disappeared 'but for the first time all grades workplace action attained an institutional base.'<sup>83</sup>

The development of unofficial organisation provided opportunities for militants from Amalgamation Committees, the Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of the World to further their aims. They saw works committees as the basis of all grades

organisation and therefore the key to ousting craft unionism and achieving the democratic control of industry. Their radical influence was plain among the leadership of the SSM and although most shop stewards and most rank and file engineers were committed trade unionists the SSM's programmes were effective and therefore attractive when sectional unions seemed no longer able to defend their interests.

'The key to containment in Britain was the authority of sectional unions and the constraints of industrial relations rules and procedures.'<sup>84</sup> Because of this the position of official trade unionism (embodied by the ASE) was significantly strengthened by the challenge which the shop stewards' organisation offered to the state. Aware of the state's predicament (its dependence on official trade unionism to exert its authority over workers and its need to implement dilution) and its own fragile position with its members the ASE became less 'responsible' and thought nothing of holding the country to ransom. 'The nation is being held up by a single union ... The negotiations with this union appear to be interminable, and no sooner is one agreement arrived at than it is broken, and new blackmailing conditions are imposed.'<sup>85</sup>

#### **Summary and Conclusion.**

In this chapter I have presented an account of the origins and consequences of the MOW Act. In particular I have concentrated on the ways in which worker organisation and resistance limited the measures taken by the state to discipline workers and prosecute the war. Firstly recruitment to the armed services caused an increasingly serious labour shortage and a corresponding increase in workers' bargaining power and the state called on trade unions to cooperate in preventing strikes and implementing dilution. This measure failed because trade union leaders were unable to deliver their members' agreement and industrial conflict began to escalate. The MOW Act was passed to prohibit strikes and impose dilution. However the MOW Act generated and provided a focus for industrial conflict, reinforced the belief that union leaders had betrayed workers' interests, turned many workers against responsible trade unionism and provided further impetus for the changes already taking place in worker organisation. The MOW Act had further damaged the image of the state and responsible trade unionism in workers' eyes.<sup>86</sup>

The ASE was the largest and most powerful trade union for the state in this period. It represented a large number of skilled workers in the munitions industries with which the state was primarily concerned. Because of its centrality the state sought its cooperation in the implementation of labour policy from the beginning

of the war. The price of its cooperation was however high in terms of both the reorganisation of production and management of industrial conflict. As this chapter has shown, the state's relationship with this trade union and its members was a troubled one which set the pattern of relations between the state and official trade unionism generally in this period. It produced not a change of tack from conciliation to coercion but the further development of conciliation as an element in the management of industrial conflict and gave a further boost to rank and file movements.

At the same time as it aimed to secure the cooperation and shore up the authority of the official trade unions over their members in order to contain unrest and implement dilution the MOW Act increased their leverage. The claim that the unions were forced to abandon their powers and force their members to accept dilution overlooks the fact that state recognition and consultation with unions encouraged union organisation leading to a rapid and sizeable increase in trade union membership (more than a million more trade union members between 1914 and 1917).<sup>87</sup> It overlooks the fact that the unions' role (as far as the state was concerned) was preserved and enhanced through the Committee on Production, that dilution was never fully or evenly implemented and of those changes which were implemented the majority were the result of protracted negotiations and qualified agreements and not



legislation. Finally it overlooks the extent to which the very existence of the powerful unofficial movement strengthened the trade unions' bargaining power. It would be overstating the case to say that skilled workers were not challenged by dilution 'and to some degree driven into opposition but [they were] by no means defeated or eliminated,' because although the state succeeded in introducing the machines, the machines became largely the province of skilled workers.<sup>88</sup>

Trade union leaders' apparent cooperation with the state however, had adversely affected their relationship with their members many of whom believed that they had come to represent employers and the state against them. This provided the impetus for the formation of rank and file movements in munitions, engineering and shipbuilding and provided a platform and a focus for the new ideas and new organisation which aimed to supersede them. It was the unofficial movement which had the confidence of the workers. 'However much the fact may be regretted, owing to special war legislation, the influence of official Trades Unionism has been reduced, and any action through ordinary Trade Union channels suffers from an official disability on this account. It cannot be anticipated that the supercession of normal Trade Union procedure by an unconstituted organisation such as the shop stewards' committee will cease with the reversion

to normal conditions after the war. However unpalatable the truth may be, it is certain that the action of these committees has been forceful and efficient in its treatment of the claims and grievances of the workmen, and the latter are not likely willingly to relinquish an organisation which has proved its usefulness.<sup>89</sup>

- 1 Sharp, 1950. p304.
- 2 Twelfth Report of Proceedings under the Conciliation Act 1896 1914-18.(1919).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 PRO LAB 2/697. February 1920.
- 5 PRO MUN 5/9/180/ 3rd Jan.1915.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Amulree, 1929.
- 8 Chang, 1968.p67.
- 9 Pelling, 1963 pl51.
- 10 Boston, 1980 pp.102-112.
- 11 Twelfth Report of Proceedings under the Conciliation Act
- 12 Sharp, 1950 p.307.
- 13 Orton, 1921 p.41.
- 14 Amulree, 1929 p.126.
- 15 Cole, 1923.
- 16 Sharp, 1950 p.309.
- 17 PRO MUN 5/57/320/1 June 1915.
- 18 PRO MUN 5/20/221/1/17. 4th June 1915 Llewellyn Smith preliminary note on required changes in labour policy.
- 19 PRO MUN 5/10/180/22. D.O.R. regulation on labour stealing.1915.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 PRO MUN 5/20/221/17 4th June 1915.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 PRO MUN 5/92/346/15 23rd January 1915.

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25 PRO MUN 5/20/220.1/17 4th June 1915.

26 Percy Girouard - a director of Armstrong Whitworth & Co., member of Armaments Output Committee and Munitions of War Committee and Director General of Munitions Supply Committee until July 1915. G.M. Booth was an industrialist on the same committees.

27 Wrigley, 1982 p.32.

28 Davidson, 1974 pp.3-20.

29 Chang, 1968 p.74.

30 Sharp, 1950 p.315.

31 Cole, 1948.

32 Rubin, 1987 p.75.

33 McLean, 1972.

34 PRO MUN 5/48/300/9

35 Hyman, 1982.

36 Cole, 1973.

37 See Appendix

38 Boston, 1980 p.112.

39 PRO MUN 5/79 negotiations to release prisoners.

40 Official History of the Ministry of Munitions  
1V,ii,56.

41 McLean, 1972 notes the longstanding tension between militant members and the Executive Council of the ASE on the 'machine question' where leading members were ousted in favour of new men pledged to take more vigorous action to protect the craftman's position against erosion.

42 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/2 December 1915.

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- 43 PRO MUN 5/49/300/15 November 1915
- 44 Adams, 1978 p.93.
- 45 PRO MUN 5/57/320/3. June 1915.
- 46 PRO MUN 5/69/323/6. Late 1915.
- 47 PRO MUN 5/342/170/2/1/A. December 1915
- 48 Cole, 1923 p.8.
- 49 PRO MUN 5/78/327/13.(14,15). Board of Trade, May 1915.
- 50 PRO MUN 5/65/322/131. 6th & 31st August 1915.
- 51 PRO MUN 5/57/320/4. September 1915.
- 52 PRO MUN 5/348/324/1. October 1915.
- 53 PRO MUN 5/72/324/11/9. Labour Department, October 1915
- 54 Boston, 1980 p109.
- 55 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/2 Macassey. December 1915.
- 56 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/2 Paterson December 1915.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 McLean, 1983.
- 60 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/2.18th Dec.1915.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 PRO MUN 5/49/300/23.
- 64 Paterson to MIN MUN 17th January 1916.
- 65 MUN 5 /73 Memorandum on the Industrial Situation on the Clyde 9th February 1916.
- 66 Statement by W.Gallacher & J.Muir. Glasgow Herald 30th March 1916.

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67 Hinton, 1973 p.140.

68 McLean, 1972 pp.3-25.

69 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/8 31st December 1915. Minutes of proceedings of a Deputation from the Amalgamated Society of Engineers to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Munitions.

70 Ibid.

71 McLean, 1972.

72 Andrews & Hobbs 1921.p55. Rubin 1987.

73 PRO MUN 5/324/15/8 1916 11th February 1916.

74 Ibid.

75 PRO MUN 5/71/324/34

76 PRO MUN 5/70/324/10 Ministry Order 885 24th of December 1916.

77 PRO MUN 5/73/324/15/2 Dec.1915.

78 Ibid p.5.

79 Boston, 1980 p110.

80 Haydu, 1988.

81 Ibid p.145.

82 Ibid

83 Ibid

84 Ibid p.206.

85 PRO MUN 5/70 notes for the Prime Minister on deputation from ASE by Llewellyn Smith. 31st December 1915.

86 Wolfe, 1923 p.10.

87 Ibid p76.

88 Cronin, 1982 p.123.

89 PRO LAB 2/254/13.

## Chapter 6

### The Ministry of Labour and Industrial Conflict 1916-18

#### Introduction

The Ministry of Labour was constituted in early 1917 to administer the Conciliation Act 1896, the Labour Exchanges Act 1909, the Trade Boards Act 1909, the National Insurance (Unemployment) Acts 1911-1916 and part one of the Munitions of War Act (referring to arbitration) - all previously the province of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade. There has been extensive debate about whether the Ministry and its responsibility for the implementation of the Whitley Scheme was a great step forward for the status of organised labour<sup>1</sup> or merely the consolidation of the status quo in the management of industrial conflict.<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention here to directly contribute to this debate. In this chapter I will focus on the Ministry of Labour as the successor to the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions in the sense that it inherited the mantle of state conciliator. It inherited the powers conferred by the Conciliation Act. In particular the function of collecting, preparing and interpreting information and other material to

facilitate agreements between disputing parties as well as to facilitate decision making by the Cabinet. The MOL now 'passively' adjudicated the merits of conflicting claims presented to it.<sup>3</sup>

The MOL's interpretation provides a new perspective from which to view the major industrial conflicts in the period 1916-18 particularly with respect to the relationship between the state and the trade unions and between the trade unions and their members which had practical implications for industrial relations policy. In the remainder of this chapter I will outline the industrial context, set out the Ministry of Labour's interpretation of industrial conflict during 1916-18 and analyse its implications for industrial relations policy.

#### **Industrial Unrest 1916-18.**

Prior to the inception of the new Ministry of Labour the tide of unrest had begun to rise again. On 27th January 1916 the Military Service Act was introduced and initially affected single men but was extended to include married men on 25th May 1916. Until mid 1916 the munitions industries had not been greatly affected by the introduction of conscription because the problem of munitions supply was as great as the shortage of men for the army. The TUC and the



Labour movement generally were against conscription but assisted voluntary recruiting of men not classed as skilled. There were many disputes over whether this or that worker was skilled. Employers classed men who were paid unskilled rates as "skilled" in order to keep them. Trade unions would then demand skilled rates for these men.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the army would recruit a skilled man and negotiations would ensue - sometimes the army won and sometimes the unions. As dilution spread, however, the conditions of exemption tightened. The Ministry of Munitions was largely dependent on information from employers for nominees for exemption. This gave employers opportunities for victimisation. Also, recruiting officers were as anxious to enlist men as the Ministry of Munitions was to exempt them 'and the consequent clash of influences was not conducive to equality of sacrifice.'<sup>5</sup>

On the 22nd of July 1916 skilled workers' trade unions sent a deputation to the Government protesting against the recruitment of skilled men. On the 9th of November 1916 a Sheffield engineer was wrongfully enlisted and an unofficial strike followed which spread across many munitions centres. The strike lasted until the 17th of November when the ASE called a National Conference after which the ASE and the Government came to an agreement known as the Trade Card Scheme whereby the ASE took over the administration of exemption certificates. Other skilled unions demanded the same

power, however, and this was granted whereupon the general unions demanded equal treatment on the grounds that no clear demarcation line existed between their members and the craft unions.<sup>6</sup> The ASE dismissed this claim saying skilled men should not be in general unions and the Government refused to extend the scheme to general unions. Control over recruitment was given to the unions in the belief that it would engender a sense of responsibility and enable them to appreciate not only the short term interests of their members but the long term interests of the country as a whole. However, the very characteristics of responsible unionism (organisation on craft lines, sectionalism, confining their activities to bargaining over wages, self help, no participation in any general activity of the working class as a class) which made it indispensable in fragmenting class struggle, worked against the state's need to inspire unity and a sense of collective responsibility and effort in the "national interest."

The state failed in its bid to persuade the craft unions to put the "national interest" first and they had used the Trade Card Scheme for the benefit of their members, 'there can be little doubt that the Trade Card system had opened a door through which very many passed in the hope of escaping active service thereby.'<sup>7</sup> On the 3rd of April 1917 the Trade Card Scheme was abolished on the grounds that insufficient numbers of

men were volunteering for the army. It was replaced by the Schedule of Protected Occupations which made exemptions the prerogative of the National Service Department which narrowed the grounds for the exemption of skilled workers.

The extension of conscription exacerbated the shortage of skilled labour and on the 29th of April 1917 a Bill was introduced to spread dilution to private work. This broke an agreement made with the unions at the Treasury Conference. Skilled workers had agreed only to dilution on war work protected by legislative safeguards and ministerial promises 'now they fancied that they saw the cloven hoof.'<sup>8</sup>

On the 3rd of May there was a strike arising out of these new proposals at Tweeddale & Smalley near Rochdale which anticipated the passage of the Bill. The firm instructed workers to teach and supervise women on work previously done by skilled men. The workers refused and were dismissed. The firm tried again with other workers who also refused and were dismissed. A strike ensued. The military authorities called up some of the strikers for the army. The strike threatened to escalate as the firm was fined under the Munitions Acts and one of the owners, Mr Tweeddale, resigned. This strike triggered off a succession of strikes after the 10th May. These strikes were all unofficial, all led by shop stewards. They were not directed from any one centre, they

involved both skilled and unskilled workers and different grievances such as the spread of dilution to private work in Lancashire, the operation of the Military Service Acts and the Munitions of War Act and the abolition of the Trade Card Scheme. The strikes spread to Coventry, Sheffield, Luton, Derby, Birkenhead, Liverpool, Bristol, Southampton, London.

The state intervened and many of the leaders were arrested under the D.O.R.A. Within a fortnight there was a general return to work on an undertaking by the state that outstanding grievances would be dealt with by negotiation with official trade union leaders. On the 12th of June 1917 eight Commissions on Industrial Unrest covering the whole country were appointed to ascertain the causes of unrest.

The Minister of Munitions began to bargain with the unions. Initially, in exchange for the extension of dilution to private work, it was proposed that the Leaving Certificate provisions of the MOW Act be amended to permit labour mobility in cases where real hardship would be caused by denying a leaving certificate. The unions rejected this plan. Addison, the Minister of Munitions, then decided to abolish the Leaving Certificate against the advice of employers, his own Labour Department and the Ministry of Labour on the grounds that it was a major cause of unrest. At the same time the wages of skilled workers were fixed by

Order and it was decided to bow to union pressure and provide a 12.5% bonus on skilled workers' wages.

One of the restrictions on output which the Treasury Agreement was designed to remove was the resistance to piecework. Its removal was implicitly directed by Section 4(3) and Section 4(5) of the MOW Act. Many employers had interpreted the Act to mean that workers had to accept payment by results or be penalised by the Act. The resulting opposition to piecework proved 'as fundamental as the objection to dilution'<sup>9</sup> and its implementation made very slow headway. It was not that objection to piecework was universal in the munitions industries but in some sections it was strongly opposed because of craft pride and the belief that piecework led to unemployment but mostly because of the conviction that whenever remunerative piecework rates had been fixed they were cut by employers. On the 13th September 1915 the Ministry of Munitions had pledged that this would be prevented under the provisions of the MOW Act which laid down that no changes in wage rates could be made without reference to the Ministry (they could not be increased or decreased). This pledge was to result in further complications as more and more firms received government contracts for shell production. These firms based their price list for production on pre war production of shells and when these prices were applied to war production, wages on less skilled work more than trebled. Employers put the

additional cost due to wage advances onto the charges they made to government contracting departments.<sup>10</sup> The resulting high wages earned by less skilled workers with the help of automatic machines became a source of grievance for skilled workers who could find themselves with lower wages than semi and unskilled workers.

To prevent a repeat of the wage anarchy which characterised the earlier part of the war, this bonus was delayed by Churchill, who succeeded Addison as Minister of Munitions, until the possible consequences of these measures were clarified and means of counteracting them were put in place.

The Hills Committee was appointed on the 27th of August 1917 to report on the effect of the removal of the Leaving Certificate on skilled workers' time rates. The Committee was made up of representatives of the trade unions, employers associations and the state. The employers wanted to exclude from the bonus any workers who had been given the opportunity of working on the payment by results system and had refused. Union representatives would not consider this and were backed by the Minister of Munitions. The union representatives asked for a general advance to time workers and piece workers not on repetition work. The employers representatives, the Ministry of Labour and the Committee on Production were opposed to the bonus on the grounds that it would disturb existing wage

relations and provoke further demands and unrest. No agreement was reached. Ultimately the War Cabinet ordered that a flat bonus of 12.5% should be paid to those classes of workers covered by the Hills Committee. This order was made on the 13th of October 1917 and immediately drew claims of eligibility from other skilled and semi skilled workers. The bonus was extended to all adult male workers in munitions which left the differentials between skilled workers and others and the grievance substantially unchanged.<sup>11</sup>

The Ministry of Labour condemned this intervention on the grounds that it was a recipe for industrial conflict and pointed out that 'The Cabinet was not primarily or continuously a wage fixing authority; it did not understand, or if it did, could not be relied upon to bear in mind, the reactions which an isolated decision might have on wage demands that were not before it; it was influenced by considerations of political expediency rather than considerations of consistency in economic policy. Its decisions therefore were frequently illogical and inconsistent with one another and represented rather concessions to the strength of the group demanding them than a recognition of the reasonableness of their claims.'<sup>12</sup>

On the day after the bonus was conceded the Leaving Certificate was abolished. Its removal deprived the

Ministry of Munitions of much of its power to refuse wage demands.

The Ministry of Munitions continued to press its case for dilution on private work by sending circulars to unions in munitions which read 'Dilution is the only means by which private industries can be maintained in such a state that they can recover after the war and compete against foreign trade. During the war foreign countries have been organising to capture industries from this country and unless dilution is introduced to carry private trades over the war period, there is a danger of serious loss of trade after the war.'<sup>13</sup> A ballot of its members by the ASE decisively rejected dilution on private work. The repeal of the Leaving Certificate had already been agreed and could not now be withheld. Churchill concluded that the dilution clause of the Bill 'was only valid in so far as it was accompanied by agreement between the parties concerned' and that 'he found it impossible to force the question through and any attempt to do so would have led to friction by which more would be lost than would have been gained by dilution ... Happily however, in this matter, as in the matter of exemption from military service, the thoroughness of American assistance diminished embarrassments which would otherwise have been grave ... they had gained a complete victory by the use of unconstitutional methods. The presumption is



strong that these methods will again be adopted when the occasion presents itself.<sup>14</sup>

An agreement was reached between the Minister of Munitions, the ASE and the unofficial strike committee confirming the withdrawal of the Trade Card Scheme, the suspension of the MOW Bill and the release of strike leaders.

#### Commissions on Industrial Unrest

When the Commissions on Industrial Unrest reported, most of the causes of industrial unrest identified by them had already been addressed with the exception of the implementation of the Whitley Scheme. The Reports concluded that unrest was due to a variety of causes which included high food prices in relation to wages, the restrictions on individual freedom and narrowing wage differentials between the skilled and unskilled as a result of the MOW Acts, a feeling that Government did not intend to honour pledges to restore trade union practices, delay in settling disputes, the Military Service Acts, housing shortages, restrictions on alcohol. The findings of these Commissions were that unrest was due to conditions arising out of the war and was not revolutionary. 'A comparison of the Reports shows that there is a strong feeling of patriotism on the part of employers and employed throughout the country and they are determined to help the state in

the present crisis. Feelings of a revolutionary character are not entertained by the bulk of the men.<sup>15</sup>

The Commissioners' recommendations included an immediate reduction in the price of food (to be subsidised by the Government) and better distribution, the adoption of the proposals of the Whitley Committee, a change in employers' attitudes such that workers should be regarded as partners and not servants in industry, the wider publicity concerning the abolition of leaving certificates, Government affirmation of its intention to restore pledges, the publication of policy with regard to housing formulated by the Ministry of Reconstruction, a bonus for skilled workers and other workers on day rates, and the encouragement of closer contact between employers and employed. A system of food rationing was being set up and reassurance on pledges was being given. The Leaving Certificate was to be abolished and a 12.5% bonus was to be added to skilled workers' wages.<sup>16</sup>

The Ministry of Labour noted that the features of the Commissions' reports which most impressed the workers were the evidence of government incompetence, the exemption from blame for industrial unrest of the workers themselves, the government policy which made profiteering possible and even encouraged it, the necessity for decentralisation of control, government

determination to increase tax on workers' wages and the deliberate depreciation of the workers' views in the press. The reports lent weight to the charges already brought against the Government by labour and socialist writers namely that the Tyne and Barrow strikes, the strike at Tweedale and Smalley, and the Engineers' strikes in May were 'due to the dilatory methods of the Ministry of Munitions where the interests of the workers were concerned.'<sup>17</sup> More importantly, the MOL added, once the strikes had broken out, the action of the Ministry of Munitions in connection with the strikes provoked a reaction from munitions workers which turned a non- revolutionary situation into a potentially revolutionary situation.

#### **The Ministry of Labour and the Shop Stewards**

The Shop Stewards Movement had loomed even larger in this widespread explosion of industrial conflict than in 1914-16 and in September 1917 the MOL took the opportunity to offer a 'fuller and more accurate record than that prepared in the Intelligence and Record Section of the Ministry of Munitions ... which appears to some extent to have been framed as an apologia for, and an explanation of, the action of the Ministry.'<sup>18</sup> The point of view adopted in our history is of course different. <sup>19</sup>

In its own account the Ministry of Labour sought to reveal the extent to which the approach adopted by the Ministry of Munitions towards the shop stewards had contributed to the problems it was intended to overcome. For the MOL this strike had exceptional significance and justified the investigation of its causes and the scrutiny of the policy of the Ministry of Munitions towards it.

The Ministry's analysis began by outlining the Ministry of Munitions' handling of the shop stewards' organisation in the industrial conflict of 1917. It was noted in the Ministry's favour that the shop stewards organisation had proved very troublesome in connection with previous labour troubles on the Clyde and elsewhere, and that it had, through some of its more prominent members, suspicious associations with both syndicalism and pacifism. 'The Ministry, therefore, had some reason to apprehend that it was in the presence of deliberate sedition - a deliberate attempt to exploit the prevalent unrest for ulterior purposes.'<sup>20</sup> The Ministry of Munitions saw itself as having two options. Should the shop stewards - men in rebellion against the heads of their own organisation - be recognised and treated with or should the leaders of the agitation, whether shop stewards or not, be arrested and prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act, for impeding the supply of munitions? The Ministry rejected the first option in favour of the second and

the War Cabinet concurred although the information on which this decision was based did not amount to legal proof. 'This was a direct challenge to a trial of strength and it was promptly taken up.'<sup>21</sup>

For the MOL this was an error of judgement. Firstly because 'Before the challenge was thrown down, a tendency towards the resumption of work had been discernible. It was not a very pronounced tendency, but there were reasons for expecting that it would soon be accentuated ... work would be resumed while the negotiations with the trade union leaders continued.'<sup>22</sup>

Secondly although the Ministry believed its position to be a strong one it soon became evident that 'the Ministry had little prospect of maintaining the output of munitions at a satisfactory level as long as the arrested men remained in prison, and that it must either settle its dispute by discussion with the shop stewards or fail to attain a settlement.'<sup>23</sup> In this situation a rigid attitude could not be maintained and eventually the Ministry was forced to recognise the shop stewards. 'The modus operandi decided upon was as follows:- The shop stewards became "the unofficial strike committee". The Executive Council of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers agreed to introduce them and the Ministry agreed to receive them under that designation.'<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, the Ministry of Labour suggested that the measures taken by the state, although aimed at quelling unrest and safeguarding the production of munitions, were inappropriate. This was because it was not clear that the shop stewards acted in opposition to the official trade union leaders. In attacking the shop stewards the Ministry of Munitions was also attacking the trade unions. It was emphasised that although the shop stewards had taken the reins from official union leaders this did not necessarily mean that union leaders had been discredited. It meant that in negotiations union executives were fighting without the one effective weapon in their armoury - the strike. If the men were dissatisfied with the result of negotiations with the Committee on Production, they took the matter into their own hands and struck. 'Now it is impossible to fight entirely unofficered and it is just here that the unofficial shop stewards' committee, being the only organisation in a position to conduct negotiations, steps in and captures the strike ... [this]... does not mean that the Labour World has been revolutionary but that the normal channels through which it acts have been changed by war legislation.'<sup>25</sup>

It was thought probable that the shop stewards' strength and persistence owed more to the support unofficially given to the shop stewards by the official trade unions and less to their associations with syndicalism and pacifism. 'It is now fairly clear that

however much the executives of the Unions objected to the methods pursued by the strikers their sympathies were entirely with the objects of the strike.'<sup>26</sup> The Ministry of Munitions did not investigate the situation thoroughly before acting. 'There is a wealth of valuable detail as to the activities of the local workers' committees which has not been recorded. Their action locally and their liaison system both deserve and require record ... though an exploration of the facts would probably be a matter of some difficulty, the relations of the ASE executive to the Unofficial Strike Committee call for some examination .... It may well be questioned whether relations between them and the unofficial strike committee were non-existent. If the Executive is in any way representative and is in any sort of touch with local organisations, it is incredible that no consultations should have taken place.'<sup>27</sup> Further, 'it is rumoured that of those members of the strike committee for whom warrants were issued, but who were not arrested, one was in hiding under the aegis of a permanent official of the Executive. The strike was not official, for no strike in a controlled industry can be official, but it is safe to conclude that at least a considerable section of the Executive of the Society is in accord with its main objects.'<sup>28</sup>

It was acknowledged that the immediate causes of the strike were the proposed amendment of the Munitions of War Act to legalise dilution on private work and the

withdrawal of the Trade Card Scheme. However for the MOL the matter could not be allowed to rest there, 'It is however necessary to insist still further on the unofficial agency which managed the strike. This was composed of committees of shop stewards, and the strike is peculiarly important as a demonstration of the growing power of these committees.' The shop stewards had a more important agenda and the strike enabled them to pursue it. 29

In the MOL's view a clear understanding of the strike turned on a clear understanding of the development of the Shop Stewards' Movement in England. When the movement developed in Sheffield in the summer of 1916 shop stewards had been appointed on a large scale by the ASE and were led by J.T. Murphy who had been elected as convenor of shop stewards. Murphy founded the Sheffield Engineering Shop Stewards Committee which later became known as the Sheffield Workers Committee. In July 1916 Murphy and other shop stewards influenced by the CWC founded a group advocating the control of industry by the workers. 'Thus to the original advocacy of particular grievances in opposition to trade union officials a new principle was added and the Shop Steward Movement became connected with a large industrial policy; but even in Sheffield the main body of the shop stewards do not appear to have been moved by a large view of policy.'<sup>30</sup>



The first success of the Sheffield Workers' Committee, it was noted, was in November 1916 when its activities secured the release of the engineer Hargreaves from the army. This enhanced the Committee's prestige and power with the rank and file. During 1917 the SSM spread to Coventry, London and Liverpool and the organisation of the movement on a national scale was achieved. This was accompanied by a modification in the character of the movement such that in addition to the organisation of workers on the basis of the workshop its stated aims included 'a larger policy of revolt against the whole of the accepted system of industry'. On the other hand this was offset by the fact that 'the mere growth of the movement had a steadying effect.' Moreover, although increasing numbers of skilled men supported the movement and for some time it was possible to identify the rank and file movement with the Shop Stewards' Movement even then the rank and file 'were not keenly interested in far reaching industrial and political programmes. They might accept these as desirable and yet they were not willing to act unless for quite definite and immediate ends.'<sup>31</sup>

In April 1917 during the strike at Coventry a Shop Stewards Committee appeared for the first time. This movement added to the SSM a theory and practice in regard to amalgamation of all workers irrespective of craft or grade. The MOL acknowledged that 'in all of the May strikes, independent as they were of official

trade union authority, the Shop Stewards gained prominence.' On the other hand it was noted that they were not engineered by the shop stewards and that the general disturbance was not in any sense primarily due to the shop stewards. The strikes were not organised but were the result of sporadic discontent among the men. The strikes expressed no policy except opposition to dilution. The shop stewards were used by the men but the Shop Stewards' Movement had little effect on the situation. The action taken by the Ministry of Munitions was fortuitous for the shop stewards since it 'appears to have made the situation still more difficult, for the rank and file took it as a challenge to their right to elect their own representatives.' The result was that 'The Shop Stewards' Movement in its extreme form, as well as in its permanently constructive policy, was thus much assisted by this situation ... the widespread strike had now produced a tendency to the organisation of shop stewards on a national scale and this organisation imperils the established official organisation of the trade unions.'<sup>32</sup>

It was clear to the MOL that from the beginning of the engineer's agitation in May, the shop stewards committees were determined to use the strike to improve their own position. Before this their position was irregular, ill defined and unconstitutional. They aimed 'to compel recognition of the shop stewards ... [and]

... to improvise a national bond between committees in the various localities. Recognition of the Shop Stewards' Committee as a definite authority in matters of dispute, whether between labour and capital or between labour and the government, had not hitherto been accorded. It was obvious to 'the more far seeing' that these were their real aims. In the first of these aims 'they were actually successful, though their success is not admitted. The interview between the Minister and the Unofficial Strike Committee, even though facilitated by the presence of the ASE Executive, in fact amounted to recognition of the former to speak for the men. In the latter aim, the shop stewards were also successful though in a minor degree. The Unofficial Strike Committee was composed of representatives of the districts affected. That a permanent National Council of shop stewards, representative of all areas where shop stewards committees exist, has not as yet been constituted, is beside the point. The principle of national as distinct from local action was enforced, and it is probable that, in future, whenever any question of more than local importance is agitated attempts will be made to ensure that it will be dealt with on the side of labour by a national body in some form representative of the shop stewards committees. Of this there is an instance in the action taken recently in connection with the Coventry agitation. It is only a question of time for a National Council of shop stewards to enter the arena as

a permanent factor in Labour politics. It appears advisable that some workshop authority representative of the workmen should be recognised at an early date.<sup>33</sup>

Finally and most importantly it was emphasised that this outburst of industrial unrest was important not only because of its numerical size, its widespread nature and the danger to the nation from the interruption to the supply of munitions of war. It was a threat to the state itself precipitated by the ill judged intervention of the Ministry of Munitions. 'Its chief importance ... lies in other directions. In the first place it was a conclusive demonstration of contempt of lawful authority. Every one of the strikers was guilty of a breach of the law and knew it, but the knowledge had no restraining influence. Any restraint was due, not to fear of a breach of the law, but in part to loyalty to the unions, whom it was felt that the shop stewards were attacking, in large part to patriotism, to which the Joint Engineering Trades Committee appealed in Coventry with great success. The Engineer's strike 'differed from the majority of strikes occurring at any period in the fact that it was not primarily directed against the employers of labour. The local strike which brought the dispute to a head was indeed so directed, but the more general strike which eventually developed was a strike of protest and

resistance against certain items of policy of the government.'<sup>34</sup>

For the Ministry of Labour much of this need not have happened. That it did was evidence of the miscalculation of the Ministry of Munitions which issued statements prejudicial to the workers and to the impotence of the MOW Act. The shop stewards were not having much success in interesting workers in fighting for a new industrial policy. The workers used them to lead their fight for immediate ends because the official unions could not. It was the action of the Ministry of Munitions which escalated the strike. At the beginning of the strike certain clear minded and unprejudiced critics 'advocated a policy of trusting the workers; abolishing all wartime restriction on their independence of action - a procedure which would of course have restored their right to strike.' This was ignored but was vindicated in retrospect because 'this strike proved clearly that the penal provisions of the Munitions Act are powerless in any case in which a general grievance is involved. Further the strike was important as a revelation of that weakness of official trade unionism to which reference has been made above. The officials of the Unions officially deplored the strike, officially called upon the members to return to work. Their official deploration and invitations were disregarded ... Lastly ... the strike was important

both as an indication of the power of the rank and file movement and as a stimulant to its activity.'<sup>35</sup>

It was concluded that 'the Munitions Acts have throttled above-board Trade Union action and forced the workers to subterranean methods ... The Trade Union leaders are summoned not to argue or bargain or indeed do anything directly representative of Labour. They are called together and confronted with a fait accompli.'<sup>36</sup> To restore the authority of the official trade unions the shop stewards' committee must be recognised. With this in mind the Ministry of Labour emphasised 'it is necessary that in recognising the Shop Stewards' Committee that organisation must be constitutionalised. It cannot be recognised as a body detached from the unions whose members it represents. To this end it is essential, not only that the Trade Union officials should be brigaded with the Government and the employers in recognising Shop Stewards' Committees but also that the Trade Unions should undertake the responsibility of overhauling their own machinery so as to assimilate those Committees.'<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile industrial unrest gathered momentum. On November the 26th 1917 a strike broke out at Coventry Ordnance (White & Poppe) works over the disparity between skilled workers and others pay, the employment of Belgian workers in place of discharged men and the recognition of shop stewards. Representatives of the

War Cabinet (GN Barnes and GH Roberts) met a deputation from Coventry and the strike ended on December the 4th when it was agreed that the Employers Federation and the Trade Unions would discuss the status to be accorded to shop stewards. The resulting agreement recognised that trade unionists in the shops should have the right to elect shop stewards. The trade unions accepted the new status of shop stewards and the employers accepted the policy of negotiation with elected representatives of the rank and file in the shops. The ASE was not a party to this agreement, however, partly because works committees of shop stewards from different unions cut across the distinction between unions and undermined the authority of the ASE.

#### **The Embargo Conflict**

In July 1918 Coventry engineers struck again over an order issued by the Ministry of Munitions preventing three Coventry engineering firms from hiring additional skilled men, except discharged servicemen, without permission. (This was known as the "embargo" scheme - a Min Mun attempt to ration skilled labour). The Coventry employers took skilled men to mean those in receipt of standard wages. Coventry shop stewards interpreted this as an attempt to reintroduce the leaving certificate, to wipe out distinctions of skill and introduce industrial conscription which boded ill for the

restoration of trade union practices after the war. 10,000 men struck in Coventry and were soon joined by 12,000 in Birmingham. Lloyd George issued a statement to the effect that continuation of the strike would mean conscription for the strikers and the strike collapsed.<sup>38</sup>

The industrial unrest led to the formation of a Commission of Inquiry known as the Committee on Labour Embargoes or the McCardie Committee after its chairman. In September 1918 this Committee found that unrest was caused by the Government's slowness in redeeming pledges given with regard to the restoration of trade union practices, the fact that skilled workers' wages had in many cases been overtaken by others, and the promises given regarding womens' wages (they were paid less than agreed) and the recruitment of skilled men had not been kept. Nevertheless it was pointed out that 'the Munitions Acts had been passed after full consultation with organised Labour and with the full approval of the community ... A large measure of freedom was left to the worker, and such a degree only of regulation was made as was necessarily required by the national interest.'<sup>39</sup> The Committee approved the principle of the embargo and recommended more effective means of consultation between employers and workers.

Commenting on the strike and its handling by the Ministry of Munitions the Ministry of Labour again



emphasised that the movement emanated from workers and not their leaders and that workers' response to Ministry of Munitions initiatives should have come as no surprise. 'That the embargo scheme should be disliked by the workers of this country was perhaps natural; that its object should be misrepresented by agitators was inevitable; that it should be made the occasion of a sudden and widespread strike proves the indiscipline of our industrial forces.'<sup>40</sup> It was noted that the munition makers had a plausible but not unanswerable case which could have been put before the Government with favourable results 'but a large body of munition makers have preferred war to negotiation and have sought to extort concessions from the Government rather than support it in safeguarding the national interests. The people who have made this choice are the engineers and toolmakers of Coventry ... a hotbed of unrest during the last two years ... While the present strike may be regarded from one point of view as concerned with wages, from another as concerned with dilution and from a third as concerned with workers' freedom to choose his employment, it is nevertheless probable that the real source of trouble is the demand of the workers for a share of responsible functions in the conduct of industry.' It was emphasised that this was not a demand pressed by the official headquarters representatives of the engineering unions 'But their inaction has led to the rise of a second and third party within the ranks of labour who are prepared to

push such claims by the exercise of the strike weapon.' The first of these were the unofficial shop stewards and local Workers' Committees, now organised nationally by a National Administrative Council meeting generally in Manchester and Sheffield, 'whose aim is revolutionary [i.e.] the assumption of responsible functions by direct representatives of the men in the workshops.'<sup>41</sup> An intermediate position was occupied by the local officials of the engineering trade unions, organised in Joint Committees in a dozen districts or more. Their object was to secure a share of local control for trade union representatives, organised at the time through branches and districts of each union and associated in Joint Committees of allied unions.

Again the Ministry of Labour emphasised that the full significance of the embargo conflict could only be appreciated in the light of the development and spread of the unofficial movement for control since May 1917. At that time the rank and file party, consisting mainly of young and aggressive workers in skilled crafts who were unhappy with the conservatism of trade union executives in London, came to the fore. They believed firstly that the trade union movement was over-centralised and that officials had ceased to understand and sympathise with the views of the men in the workshops. Secondly they believed that craft union officials were narrowly concerned with craft interests and not sufficiently alive to the necessity for

solidarity and common action by all crafts working in the same industry and for the same group of employers. Thirdly the trade union leaders who had been selected by the Government to advise it, were thought to have neither the power nor the inclination to enforce conditions on the determination of Government policy or to secure a share of control in carrying it out. This movement aimed therefore at decentralisation, inter-union solidarity and control in the conduct of industry for the workers. An attempt was made to deal with the first problem by the creation of unofficial shop stewards, the extension of the function of all shop stewards and the formation of local Workers' Committees based on the unofficial shop stewards organisation. In this movement the leadership had definitely fallen into the hands of the Sheffield and Glasgow groups notably of J.T.Murphy and E.T.Lisner 'who have displayed considerable constructive ability and have maintained a fairly reasonable attitude during the crisis of the war.'<sup>42</sup>

Simultaneously, it was noted, endeavours were made to secure inter-union solidarity and combined action through the unofficial "Amalgamation Committee" organised by W.F.Watson of London. Among Watson's followers at Coventry were T.W.Dingley and J.Read. Watson sought to achieve his ends, not through the normal constitutional authorities of the unions, but by revolutionary means, by referenda to the rank and file.

At Coventry a shorter cut was devised - putting pressure on the existing local officials of the craft unions and infiltrating existing Joint Committees of Allied Trades. In October it was reported at a conference of Watson's "Amalgamation Committee" that his Coventry followers had gone over in body to the Engineering Joint Committee. This body acted as a coordinating link for the official shop stewards of more than a dozen unions of skilled workers and as it came under the control of the revolutionary party, it assumed in November the responsibility for the conduct of a large scale strike to secure the recognition of shop stewards as direct representatives of the workers in each shop.

For the MOL the next stage was to provide the means for common action by the Joint Committees of Allied Trades in the several centres in which they sympathised with the "advanced policy". A national conference met at Leeds on the 1st of September 1917, to consider the question of food control; another was held on the 22nd of October when a National Emergency Committee was appointed, with Leonard Mason of Leeds as secretary. On the 20th of January the Joint Committee again assembled at Leeds to deliver an ultimatum to the Government on the subject of manpower and the summoning of an international labour conference.

In the early part of 1918 the two rank and file movements united. They had behind them the prestige of the successful strike of May 1917 but their lack of standing in the existing organisation of trade unionism was a considerable handicap. On the other hand the semi-official Joint Committees which were for some purposes "recognised" trade union authorities, had still to win their spurs as champions of the liberty of the workers. They found their opportunity in the embargo scheme and the circumstances of its introduction - an industrial issue much more convenient than either food prices or the Manpower Bill. The strike policy is in direct defiance of the Government and the motive is workers' control over industry. Strike leaders have not 'been slow to seize upon the incongruity of recruiting skilled men for the army and then announcing that there is a shortage of these men for providing necessary munitions' and misrepresenting it as the revival of the leaving certificate, an attack on the status of the skilled worker by promoting dilution and an expedient for reducing wages.'<sup>43</sup>

The MOL concluded that 'the strike leaders have consistently and successfully exploited the fundamental weakness of wartime labour policy which is the selection by the Government of conservative officials who do not constitute 'an adequate representation of the mind of the men and women in the workshops' to act in a purely advisory capacity in London. In consequence

'Labour has come to regard itself as having no real responsibility either for policy or for administration of the industrial matters which concern it. At the same time the exigencies of war place in the hands of labour unprecedented opportunities for showing its power to thwart a policy and hamper administration. The strike is the natural outcome of the concentration in inexperienced hands of power without responsibility.'<sup>44</sup>

Against this background the MOL felt it was important not place too much faith in the recommendations of the Whitley Committee (set up in 1916) which were widely believed to offer the solution to industrial conflict by offering a measure of control over the running of industry to workers. Although it used 'the phraseology of far reaching reform' the Whitley Committee 'confined its actual proposals to conservative modifications of the existing practice of industrial negotiation.' It proposed to extend the existing machinery for conciliation and arbitration so that it would be available at works, district and national level to 'materially reduce the number of occasions on which, in the view of either employers and employed, it is necessary to contemplate recourse to a stoppage of work.'<sup>45</sup>

The committee claimed that these recommendations had 'the effect of conferring on the Joint Industrial Councils, and through them upon the several industries,

a large measure of self government.' Indeed this report was popularly taken to have conceded industrial self government. In fact it conceded nothing and placed 'no obligation on anybody to do anything.' Even those officials of trade unions and employers' associations who were on the Committee ignored it. Those trade unions and employers who did cooperate on industrial councils found their rights and powers exactly the same as before.<sup>46</sup>

However the rhetoric of the Whitley Report had caught the public imagination which 'was unfortunate since it tended both to raise hopes that were certain to be disappointed and to divert attention from the need and possibilities for improving the machinery of industrial conciliation to which the practical proposals pointed.'<sup>47</sup>

Although the MOL acknowledged that 'In certain places a successful method is in vogue in the constitution of Joint Trade Committees consisting of union officials and dealing on the one hand with the unions and on the other with the shop stewards'<sup>48</sup> it was concluded that 'No solution of the problem created by the strikes could be obtained without acknowledging the power of the shop stewards as representing the rank and file.' This the Whitley Scheme did not do. Even if it had done so it was emphasised that 'It would be absurd to

minimise the great difficulties which will have to be overcome.'<sup>49</sup>

The MOL outlined the difficulties. Firstly it had been found that employers objected strongly to any further extension of collective bargaining, especially if it involved further recognition of the unions by giving them some status in relation to works committees and secondly there was the danger that other employers, equally opposed to an extension of trade union recognition but more politic in their methods, would attempt to use works committees to "dish" the unions and stop the mouths of agitators, without conceding any real devolution of authority and responsibility. Whitleyism was not welcomed either by the ASE or the Triple Alliance and it was recognised that the Shop Stewards Movement saw works committees as an 'employers dodge' started to take the wind out of the sails of the Shop Stewards, and were not intended to improve the position of the workers.'<sup>50</sup>

Although it was embraced by general workers' unions and in poorly organised trades many of the well organised and established trade unions were fiercely protective of their independence and of their sectional interests. They suspected the Whitley scheme variously of being a device to marginalise trade unions, a way of avoiding honouring the pledge to restore trade union practices,



the substitution of the concept of workers' participation for workers' control, and such 'executive powers' as works committees were to have eg., the maintenance of discipline, timekeeping etc., were seen as largely in the interests of employers.<sup>51</sup> Thus trade union reaction seemed to bear out the prediction made in another MOL internal memorandum on works committees 'inevitably sooner or later (they will) rouse the opposition of the keener trade unionists, who could hardly be blamed if they were to regard it as a mere bogus scheme. Hollow reforms are not merely useless; they are dangerous, for they cannot fail to be used to point the argument that the government is not sincere in its treatment of labour.'<sup>52</sup>

The situation had been limited and temporarily defused in the MOL's view not by the authorities concerned or by the promise of the Whitley Scheme but mainly by a surge of patriotism engendered by the German Offensive which had begun on March 21st 1918 and lasted until October 1918. This 'changed the whole industrial situation. The Government was enabled to pursue its policy without fear of serious opposition and the political aims of the leaders in the shop stewards' movement became ineffective so far as popular feeling was concerned even in their immediate entourage.'<sup>53</sup>

#### Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has examined industrial conflict during 1916-18 from the perspective of the Ministry of Labour. The MOL found that the measures taken by the Ministry of Munitions in respect of industrial unrest had been ill considered and inappropriate. In particular they had not taken account of the developments in the relationship between the official trade unions, the shop stewards and the rank and file and within the shop stewards' movement. The MOL believed that there was no longer any clear opposition between the official and the unofficial movement - that the latter had the practical support of the former. Although the shop stewards aims were radical the aims of the rank and file were not. The workers used the shop stewards to represent their interests because they had little choice and not because they supported their aims. The workers interpreted the intervention of the Ministry of Munitions as a challenge to their right to elect their own leaders and the state became a clear focus for workers' discontent. This was fortuitous for the shop stewards who were able to strengthen their own organisation but dangerous for the state which now had few options left for maintaining control. One widely favoured solution was the Whitley Scheme. However, although the the MOL believed that its continued existence and authority was to a large extent tied up with the implementation of the Whitley scheme and the status and functions given to structures set up under

it by the state, it was at pains to point out its shortcomings as a solution to industrial conflict. The climate created by the MOW Act and the Ministry of Munitions' handling of industrial unrest during the war rendered the MOL's task, the management of industrial conflict through conciliation, extremely difficult. The Minister of Labour had earlier advised the Cabinet that if the war ended before these concerns had been addressed 'the outlook for the future of industry is by no means bright.'<sup>54</sup>

- 1 Middlemas, 1979 p.137.
- 2 Clay, 1929 Chapter 7.
- 3 Landis, 1938 p.20.
- 4 Cole, 1923 p.131.
- 5 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Memorandum on the Strike of Engineers in May 1917. Sept 1917.
- 6 Cole, 1923 p.133.
- 7 PRO LAB 2/254/13 18th December 1917.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Wolfe, 1923 p.246.
- 10 Clay, 1929 p.202.
- 11 Ibid p.273.
- 12 Clay, 1929 p.163.
- 13 Cole, 1923 p.147.
- 14 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Sept 1917.
- 15 Summary of the Reports of the Commissions on Industrial Unrest London. HMSO.1917.Cd 8696.
- 16 Wolfe, 1923 p.262.
- 17 PRO MUN 5/56 Review of Government Policy and Administration Intelligence and Record Section. August 1917.
- 18 The Ministry of Labour took over the task of reporting on the labour situation from the Ministry of Munitions in 1917.
- 19 PRO LAB 2/254/13 December 1917. The Ministry of Munitions' account referred to was included in the Official History of the Ministry of Munitions

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20 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Attitude of the Ministry of Munitions to the Demands of the Shop Stewards. Sept 1917.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.p.129.

23 Ibid p.134.

24 Ibid p.135.

25 Ibid.

26 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Memorandum on the strike of Engineers in May 1917. (Sept 1917)

27 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Sept. 1917 handwritten supplementary note attached to this document stated that it had proved impossible to obtain any details of negotiations between the ASE executive and the shop stewards.

28 PRO LAB 2/254/13 Sept 1917.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Clegg, 1985 p.190.

39 Wolfe, 1923 p.147.

40 PRO MUN 5/55 Intelligence and Statistics Department  
26th July 1918.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid p.327.

46 PRO LAB 2/212/11 Memorandum On The Interim Report of  
the Reconstruction Sub Committee on the Relations  
between Employers and Employed 28th of June 1917. Clay  
1929 p.152.

47 Clay, 1929 p.153.

48 Ibid p.11.

49 PRO LAB 2/254/12 The Establishment of Works  
Committees in Controlled Engineering Establishments.  
August 1917.

50 PRO LAB 2/254/12 1918.

51 Ibid.

52 PRO LAB 2/254/12 Comments on the Ministry of  
Munitions Memorandum 1917

53 PRO LAB 2/697 February 1920.

54 PRO LAB 2/212/18 Internal Memorandum signed by the  
Minister of Labour 29th May 1917.

## Chapter 7

### The National Industrial Conference

#### Introduction

The National Industrial Conference was summoned by the Ministry of Labour on the 27th of February 1919 to consider the question of widespread industrial unrest. Across Europe the established political order appeared to be disintegrating and in Britain 'the war between nations had ended but the war between capital and labour seemed to have only just begun.'<sup>1</sup> Against this background the calling together of both sides of industry under the auspices of the National Industrial Conference to agree a joint programme of social reform was hailed as a great step forward such that there were now seen to be 'two methods of making the revolution which we feel is happening throughout the world, the Russian and the British method.'<sup>2</sup> However in July 1920 hopes for the NIC as the engine of a peaceful British revolution - a bloodless victory for labour - expired when the government refused to accept its report and the Provisional Joint Committee resigned.

The reasons why the government set up the NIC in the first place and then did not honour its commitment to implementing the PJC's recommendations are widely

disputed among commentators. Cole<sup>3</sup> has argued that the National Industrial Conference and the Coal Commission (known as the Sankey Commission) were attempts to avert serious industrial unrest not by making actual concessions but by encouraging trade unions to believe that substantial concessions would be made - they were government strategies to buy time until the revolutionary threat had passed. Charles distances himself a little from the idea of a conspiracy by arguing that 'The part played by the Conference in quelling unrest in the February of 1919 was crucial and, whether planned or not, combined with the manipulation of the Sankey Commission in what appears to be a very subtle strategy.'<sup>4</sup>

In Middlemas's view the NIC was a development of Lloyd George's plan 'to raise up representative institutions, or estates, capable of resolving major industrial problems among themselves and of meeting government on political questions in the manner of corporations addressing themselves to the Crown ... [the NIC was] the first attempt to create a formal triangular relationship and utilise the tendency referred to here as corporate bias.' It was an attempt to promote representative employers and workers' organisations from interest groups to 'governing institutions.' For Middlemas this phrase describes bodies recognised by government as bargaining partners, which have been granted permanent rights of access and devolved powers



by the state.<sup>5</sup> Middlemas shifts the focus away from the state and divides responsibility for the failure of the NIC between the trade unions and employers. The NIC failed according to Middlemas 'not just because of the aloofness of certain unions, whom Lloyd George then blamed, but also because the employers' openness and goodwill in public ... were belied by their private acts as industrial federations.'<sup>6</sup>

Lowe argues against the view that the NIC, the MOL and Whitley would have amounted to the devolution of power to industry so that it could govern itself. He emphasises that official policy during the war rested on two premises - increased industrial organisation through Whitley councils and greater industrial autonomy through the policy of "home rule for industry". However, like Middlemas, Lowe <sup>7</sup> is concerned to emphasise that the government was not guilty of premeditated duplicity in February 1919 when it summoned the Conference. He points out that for the first six months it played an important part in the negotiations and that in any case the responsibility for the success of the NIC rested not with the government but with the two sides of industry, particularly the trade unions. The fact that employers and unions were prepared to cooperate at the conference and on the Provisional Joint Committee shows that a basis for a consensus policy - for a British rather than a Russian Revolution - did exist. The problem was

that the labour movement as a whole was unable to act with enough unity and moderation to dispel the fears of employers and government. The employers prevaricated, the government was distracted by other urgent matters of state and failed to take the bold political stand which might have won greater popular support for the NIC. When the government turned its full attention to the Provisional Joint Council's work it found that neither industrial agreement nor ready legislation existed to encourage its adoption of what was an ambitious social policy. If the government was guilty of anything it was not of the failure of the Conference but failure to formulate an alternative policy.

Lowe largely accepts at face value the official reasons for the state's failure to implement the principal recommendations of the PJC and is concerned to analyse this failure in terms of the powerful personalities involved. However, as a MOL internal memorandum later noted 'the official reasons' for the breakdown of the NIC which focused on the shortcomings of the PJC and not on the state's part in its downfall 'leave a good deal to be explained.' <sup>8</sup>

This chapter builds on this observation and argues that the NIC and the Sankey Commission were part of the policy of conciliation which had proved more successful in averting serious industrial unrest than confrontation.<sup>9</sup> It was a policy which had proven

advantages. It bought time, gave the impression that something was being done, allowed the state to retain control (the state dictated the terms of reference of the conference), recognised only responsible trade union leaders with "responsible" demands which made it easier for "concessions" to be made and at the same time emphasised and exacerbated divisions within the organised working class.

The NIC was called by the state in response to signs that a situation which it had worked long and hard to avert had finally arrived. 'This was the old dream of using the mass power of organised labour as a means of exerting direct pressure on government for what Establishment figures, including most leading union officials defined as political ends. Government leaders considered they had good cause to fear revolutionary elements that might succeed in harnessing the power generated by large scale industrial stoppages ... The Establishment nightmare had already raised its head in two minor cases in 1918 but appeared most vividly in connection with the miners' claim in February 1919 for higher wages, reduced working hours, state ownership and 'democratic control of the pits.'<sup>10</sup> For the state 'the issue was not revolution and socialism but direct industrial action for limited and specific purposes.'<sup>11</sup>

The remainder of this chapter will outline the industrial context from which the NIC emerged after the

end of the war and its analysis by the MOL. From this it will become clear that initially, the state felt compelled to give way in the face of powerful worker organisation but to concede as little as possible as gradually as possible. As time passed however deep divisions within the ranks of labour showed that worker organisation was not as strong as it looked and that even this minimum was unnecessary. It was believed that the state could safely withdraw and let worker organisations shatter themselves in industrial conflict. This policy, combined with the relinquishment of control over industry made necessary by the war, aimed to reassert the distinction, which had become blurred, between the industrial and political spheres and to relocate the trade unions firmly in the former. Industrial conflict in this period, which focused on the state instead of employers, was pushing the trade unions into the political arena. The state aimed to re-establish the province of trade unions as industry and employers as the focus of conflict and to reinforce moderate trade unionism and its authority over the organised working class in this province. This was what was meant by "home rule for industry".

#### **Industrial Unrest after the end of the War.**

The first important dispute after the war ended grew out of the movement in shipyards and factories

throughout the Clyde region for a shorter working week without loss of pay in order to keep wartime gains and avoid post war unemployment. Although there were disagreements as to the exact reduction of hours required, there was general agreement on the need for a shorter working week to be instituted as soon as the war ended. The executives of the STUC and the Scottish Labour Party sent the Government a memorandum to this effect in August 1918.

Within three weeks of the Armistice being signed the STUC called a conference on Demobilisation problems which passed a resolution calling for the immediate reduction of working hours to a maximum 40 per week. Failing Government action, the Conference voted to 'devise such methods of industrial action as will enforce this demand.' The Parliamentary committee of the STUC prevaricated, caught between pressure from the factories and shipyards led by the shop stewards movement, and criticism from some trade union officials who had been trying unsuccessfully to put the brakes on the mass movement led by the shop stewards. The shop stewards met on the 19th January and prepared a strike manifesto. A general strike was to be called on the 27th January and a Joint Strike Committee was appointed, chaired by Emmanuel Shinwell, councillor and chairman of the Glasgow Trades and Labour Council. There was widespread support for this move and offers of sympathetic action came from Tyneside and Belfast as

well as most other Clyde factories and yards. The ASE however had already negotiated a 47 hour week with engineering employers (without meal breaks or loss of production which was not a great improvement on the previous 54 hour week with meal breaks) and was opposed to further struggle. Nevertheless, the strike went ahead and spread rapidly and 40,000 men were out by the second day. Harland and Wolff's shipyards closed down and the city was without gas or electricity.<sup>12</sup>

In a meeting called to discuss this dispute Sir Robert Horne (Minister of Labour) noted that the strike was in direct contravention of an agreement reached by the accredited representatives of the employers and workers. In a bid to reinforce the trade unions' authority the Minister sent a telegram to the Lord Provost of Glasgow with a message to be conveyed to the strikers' leaders which read 'the government are unable to entertain requests for intervention made by local members of unions if representatives are acting for them in conference with employers. Such action on the part of the government could only undermine the authority of those who have been chosen by the men to represent them and would destroy the cooperation between employers and employed on which the hope of industrial peace depends.'<sup>13</sup>

By the 29th January 70,000 men were out and sympathy strikes began in Edinburgh and Leith. John Brown's

shipyards came to a standstill under the weight of massive picketing, power stations were closed in Glasgow and by 31st January 100,000 men were on strike and all main factories at a standstill.<sup>14</sup> Plans had been made by the War Cabinet to concentrate sufficient force in Glasgow to prevent disorder and protect volunteers or others available to take over the operation of the generating stations and municipal services.<sup>15</sup> It was noted that the situation in Glasgow had been brewing for a long time, that the disaffected were in the minority and that there would have to be a conflict to clear the air. Nevertheless 'we should be careful to have plenty of provocation before taking strong measures. By going gently at first we should get the support of the nation and then troops could be used more effectively, the moment for their use has not yet arrived, (the moment the revolt advanced over the line of a pure wage dispute and the strikers were guilty of a serious breach of the law, then was the moment to act) in the meantime the Defence of the Realm Act is still in force and some of the leaders of the revolt should be seized.'<sup>16</sup>

On the 31st of January there was a mass demonstration of strikers in George Square which was ultimately broken up with baton charges by mounted policemen. Overnight, troops were moved to the city, tanks were moved in and machine gun posts set up. The strike leaders were arrested and by the 3rd February the

leaderless strikers began to drift back to work - the forty hours demand was abandoned and the STUC accepted forty-seven hours in the engineering trades.

In the coal industry in 1919 more than 6,600,000 working days were lost through disputes.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of 1919 miners demanded an increase of 30% on existing wages less war wage; full discharge of demobilised miners; a six hour day and the nationalisation and democratic control of the mining industry. During the war production and working conditions had vastly improved, national wage agreements including a 'war wage' of three shillings a day had been instituted and no other industry had received comparable wage increases.<sup>18</sup>

The state rejected the miners' demands and offered a flat rate of one shilling a day. The miners' declined this offer and a national strike threatened. A national ballot showed a large majority of miners in favour of industrial action and notices of a national strike went out for 21st February 1919. Lloyd George called the Executive of the MFGB to meet him and offered participation in a Commission of Inquiry into the situation if the strike notices were postponed. The MFGB executive had great difficulty in persuading miners to accept this offer <sup>19</sup> but accepted it was, and the Commission known as the Sankey Commission was instructed to present an interim Report by the 31st



March 1919 <sup>20</sup> the findings of which the Government agreed to adopt 'in the letter and in the spirit'<sup>21</sup>

The labour movement displayed its potential strength and unity shortly after the miners' initiative when its attention became focused on the situation in Russia where Britain was supporting Poland with money and munitions to fight the Red Army.

At this time there was widespread industrial unrest in Britain aside from that in the mining industry, on the Clyde and in Belfast. Workers in many industries, notably the railways, threatened strike action. During this time the Cabinet was close to panic due to the industrial unrest and uncertainty as to whether the armed services would remain loyal in the face of a general strike.<sup>22</sup> Plans were made to break a general strike of the Triple Alliance. During the war a central mechanism had been established to secure the supply of essential goods and services under the auspices of the Committee on Industrial Unrest 1917 which later became the Supply and Transport Organisation and this had set a precedent for a similar apparatus in peacetime.<sup>23</sup> While deliberations were going on in the NIC and the Sankey Commission the organisation of the Industrial Unrest Committee, as it was now called, was being perfected and the Cabinet debated measures in addition to the Defence of the Realm Acts to combat a Triple Alliance strike.<sup>24</sup>

### An Analysis of the Industrial Conflict

In a report of the situation to the Cabinet in May 1919 the Ministry of Labour <sup>25</sup> singled out the most disturbing feature of the industrial unrest as the movement towards "direct action." The Ministry noted that this was 'a movement which has always been in existence but has gathered great impetus recently as a result of the increase in strength of the forces behind it.' It was 'the result of the reaction against political as opposed to industrial action which began about 1910 and of the teachings of the school whose motto is that industrial action precedes political action and controls the strength of it. This reaction may roughly be said to be the key-note of the whole labour situation since that time.' It was noted however that even the most extreme upholders of the view that economic power is the key to all power had never recommended the actual strike except as a last resort and this was where they differed from and were less dangerous than the French syndicalists for whom the strike was an end in itself. Instead 'our more prosaic and philosophical pioneers' recommend firstly, organisation so as to make the threat of a serious

strike a real danger to the community. Secondly the full use of this threat to strike and lastly, and only if necessary, the strike itself. So for the English revolutionary socialist a great parade of industrial power, even if there is nothing behind it, is of immense importance.'<sup>26</sup>

In the less highly organised industries in Britain, it was noted that only the first stage had been reached. However a survey of the record of organisation which had taken place since 1910 showed that there was little room for doubt that the reaction against the political weapon had been a force in shaping it. The outstanding development from the MOL's point of view was the formation of the Triple Alliance created quite definitely as a weapon for industrial action in 1915. This development showed that in the more highly organised trades the first aim had already practically been accomplished and that fulfilment of the second aim - the full use of the threat of the strike - was perhaps reaching its zenith 'and it is here that the practical importance of these considerations emerges.'<sup>27</sup>

For the MOL this was illustrated by the miners' who had secured the Coal Commission through the strike threat. 'It is impossible to conceive of an ill organised industry playing the part the Miners' Federation did in the negotiations which led to the Coal Commission and

equally impossible to conceive of their producing such an outcome.' However it was emphasised that the Coal Commission, whatever its findings, would not placate the miners. 'It would be a mistake to suppose as many people do, that the more extreme miners' leaders or even the more level headed, look upon the Coal Commission as an impartial tribunal appointed as the best means of settling the future of the industry. They look upon it as a means to certain ends envisaged even before it was set up and if it does not attain those ends, other means will have to be found for doing so.' While it had its disadvantages for the miners who thought they did not need the Coal Commission and could achieve their aims through industrial power alone, the MOL pointed out the advantages of the Coal Commission for the state, 'it has thrown a great deal of light where it was needed. It has spent a considerable amount of time during which hot feeling may have had time to cool and whatever decision it comes to will have the backing of that portion of public opinion in the country, even among the miners themselves, which looks upon it as an impartial tribunal and this is a very real force with which the Miners Federation has to reckon.'<sup>28</sup> Even from their own point of view the MOL believed that the miners had taken the wiser course because the strike possesses disadvantages of a similar type quite as great if not greater than the disadvantages of the Commission. 'Organisation is never so strong as it looks.'<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless given the fact that for the miners the Commission was a means to preconceived ends it was likely to provide only a temporary respite and the MOL again predicted that if the miners failed to get what they wanted from the Commission they would attempt to get it otherwise. It was felt that such an attempt would be controlled by consideration of industrial power alone - whether they thought they were strong enough - and not by any feeling that an impartial tribunal had pronounced against them except inasmuch as such a feeling could create a public opinion unfavourable to further action. Even if they got what they wanted the MOL believed that it would be a mistake to suppose that that would be the end of the matter. 'Industrial power like any other power grows with success and use. It is moreover, a versatile thing which can be used in all sorts of ways.' In support of this view the MOL pointed to 'a number of experiments with a view to substituting it for older political methods. For example a movement had been started to deflect the Governments' policy in foreign affairs by means of it. The miners had coupled their acceptance of the Interim Report of the Coal Commission with a threatening resolution on the question of the withdrawal of troops to Russia and subsequently further action was taken in conjunction with the Triple Alliance which however, 'as was anticipated, appears not to have come to very much.' A similar resolution

with regard to conscription was passed at the same time. 'Again the miners of South Wales led, it is to be noticed, by two of their political leaders, members of the House of Commons - have just resolved to refuse to pay further income tax on the present basis and called on the MFGB as a whole to take similar action. The Northumberland miners, in addition to appealing to the MFGB on this matter have resolved to lay the case before the Triple Alliance with a view to taking industrial action.'<sup>30</sup>

According to the MOL the same tendency could be found throughout the whole area of industrial organisation and the only way to diffuse it was to strengthen official trade unionism. 'The more such organisation and the power which follows it grows, the more varied and numerous will be the uses to which that power will be put or attempted to be put. There is in the long run only one antidote to its abuse, namely a parallel growth of the social responsibilities of the organisations wielding it.'<sup>31</sup>

The MOL focused on the miners as the clearest example of this trend away from constitutional methods 'because theirs is the boldest and most progressive organisation in the field, but there are other examples to be found.' It was noted that the railwaymen were in the same position as the miners. They too had gained their recent settlement by the threat of industrial action

and would not be easily diverted by delaying tactics. 'That settlement was not final and when a final settlement is attempted, as it will have to be sooner or later, no doubt the railwaymen will repeat the same tactics perhaps with some new devices which by that time will have been discovered to be effective. The same tendency can be seen too in a more general form in the large crop of Commissions and Committees recently appointed to settle definite industrial problems.'<sup>32</sup>

It was concluded that a shift in power had taken place such that 'the increased industrial power of labour - and it must be added here of employers too - has made the ordinary legislative procedure inadequate with the result that a sort of devolution into the industrial sphere has taken place and with it has gone a certain amount of power from the supreme legislative assembly which in industrial matters becomes merely a body for registering decisions arrived at outside itself.' The most important example of this for the MOL was 'the inception of a supreme Joint Industrial Council with the aim of settling industrial conditions largely without reference to Parliament in future. This aim is undoubtedly held by strong personalities both on the employers' and on the workers' side, and is clearly reflected in the Report of the Provisional Joint Committee.' For the MOL this was a consequence of the temporary increase in power of both sides industry due

to novel and artificial conditions - the temporary economic boom - pertaining at the end of the war.

#### **Proposed strategy**

In workers' case legislation had previously been ruled out because it was not as effective as "trade union discipline and control", and judging from past experience it was not certain that workers would abide by it and there was also the risk of distancing union leaders from local leaders and the rank and file.<sup>33</sup> The MOL concluded that 'organised industrial power is a thing which cannot be abolished any more than a physical force can be abolished but can only be dealt with by being turned in the right direction and harnessed through the superposition of corresponding responsibility.'<sup>34</sup>

Given this it was decided that future strategy must be based on restricting the opportunities available for exercising it to those who controlled this power. It was emphasised that there was little point in relying on the findings of Commissions, Committees or Conferences 'as these will carry little weight with the more advanced controllers of industrial power since they look upon them only as so many ways of avoiding a strike.'<sup>35</sup>



For the MOL the focus of strategy had to be the chief organ of industrial power - the Triple Alliance.

'This is exactly the role which its creators foresaw for it and it is bidding fair to vindicate their foresight with extraordinary accuracy.'<sup>36</sup> It was thought difficult to predict what this organ might achieve in the future because this depended on outside forces. It was acknowledged however that it had already done what it was intended to do, namely to become the focus and machine for the use of the industrial weapon, drawing towards itself and overshadowing all other activities in the same direction and entirely superseding any other organisation which might have similar pretensions such as the General Federation of Trade Unions.

The Ministry had to think ahead and consider the number and importance of the opportunities which forthcoming events were likely to provide to the leaders of the Triple Alliance for the development and accomplishment of their aims. When these were considered it became obvious that there was 'considerably more cause for anxiety than a superficial glance at the state of affairs at the moment might suggest.'<sup>37</sup>

It was noted that the first of these opportunities was likely to be the Coal Commission Report due for the 20th of June. 'As already noted, if this doesn't give the miners' leaders all they think their industrial

power entitles them to they will not be content especially if other circumstances favour industrial action. While in other circumstances nationalisation alone would not be a sufficient plank to obtain solid backing for action or the serious threat of it, any additional issue of a personal nature might entirely alter the situation.'<sup>38</sup>

In addition another opportunity was likely to arise out of the negotiations with the railwaymen. At the time they were proceeding satisfactorily but it was believed that 'in view of the somewhat uncertain situation as regards railway control in general ... they might develop dangerous qualities and in any case the wage problem had only been postponed.'<sup>39</sup>

The foregoing were issues in which the Triple Alliance was inherently directly concerned but the MOL noted that there were a number of other issues in which the leaders were directly concerning themselves as a result of the industrial power which they were in a position to exploit. Conscription, the Blockade, the question of Russia, the treatment of conscientious objectors and political prisoners, the income tax limit and finally the military circular with regard to strikes were cited 'they are all being used together and separately to their fullest capacity. In none of these particular cases has anything of great importance happened, but together, in an atmosphere otherwise troubled, they

could all become effective.' This was because they all contained grievances and some grievances with quite serious implications. 'The income tax and conscription issues both affect the individual in a way that makes them of some importance. The Army circular is just the sort of thing to raise a maximum of indignation as results have shown. The questions of the Blockade and Russia are closely connected with the question of Peace Terms and policy towards enemy countries which, of course possesses considerable potentialities.'<sup>40</sup>

The MOL thought that lessons could be learned from the tactics employed by the German Government in dealing with this situation. It was noted that the German Government was in a strong position with labour and socialist organisations generally because although it took no action, it purported to represent 'as it takes every opportunity for saying, that it does the very thing they are striving for. With the presentation of the peace terms the time has come for them to take action along this line, and they appear to be doing it with some success.'<sup>41</sup>

The MOL focused on another 'quite peculiar' issue in which the Triple Alliance was reported to be concerning itself. This was the issue surrounding the Police and Prison Officers' Union which it was thought would be certain to be exploited to the utmost by those who intended to make trouble. The trouble over the Police

Union, especially in the light of its reported recruiting successes in Scotland, could quite easily attract attention in industrial labour circles and provoke sympathetic action.

This led the MOL to consider other sources of trouble not directly connected with the Triple Alliance. Two of these were seen as particularly important. Firstly the movement in favour of a 44 hour week was not exhausted. It was noted that following a conference representing the E and STF, the ASE and the Workers' Union, a ballot had been taken as to action in this matter and in the case of the E and STF it was reported to have resulted in a strong majority in favour of action. In the case of the ASE it was thought unlikely that the Executive would be allowed to let matters rest even if they wanted to. The National Union of General Workers, the Cotton trade unions and even a number of smaller organisations were also moving in this matter. 'Here again is an issue with very personal implications and one in which public opinion has already gained considerable momentum which the 48 Hour Bill will do little to allay and may even aggravate.' Secondly there was 'the large and vague question of unemployment.' This was seen to be so closely interwoven by action and reaction with all other issues not only industrial but also commercial and connected not only with Britain but also with others, that it was impossible to make any statement regarding it. All that could be said was that

trouble arising, or even results arising, from settlements which avoid trouble, connected with all the other issues enumerated above, cannot but have an aggravating effect on the problems connected with unemployment and that difficulties arising through these problems in turn aggravate every other difficulty which arises. There seemed to the MOL little doubt that certain industrial settlements already made were having adverse commercial effects both directly through diminution in production and indirectly in a vaguer and wider sphere, in the lack of confidence which they tend to foster. A movement of this kind was cumulative and tended to invade every sphere of social activity with corresponding direct reactions in the industrial world which was its source. 'If the attitude and position of controllers of industrial power, outlined at the outset be now recalled it will be seen that the situation is hardly one in which all difficulties can be considered to have been overcome. It is probably not entirely accidental that all these issues may be expected to come more or less to a head at about one and the same time not very far off.'<sup>42</sup>

#### The Demand for Control

The solution to the rapid growth of industrial power advocated by the MOL was 'to give way before the concentration of industrial and social power' but 'to give way as little and as gradually as possible.'<sup>43</sup> This was where the MOL felt that 'the question of "control" emerges as presenting in some form or other what appears to be the only adequate solution. The only question was - what form and what amount of control, for control is a very vague term. The minimum amount would appear to be defined by the consideration that it must be sufficient to develop such a sense of responsibility as will enable labour representatives, when considering demands to be put forward, to appreciate their possible results not only from the individual workman's point of view in the short period but from the wider point of view of the general welfare, which is the individual's point of view in the long run.'<sup>44</sup>

The MOL emphasised that the extent of control envisaged by the Whitley Report was so vague that 'it leaves in the mind the assumption that things in this sphere will remain more or less as they are.' The situation had developed since the Whitley Report was written. Now it was not just on control but on "how much" control that the big organisations were concentrating all their industrial power and which they were forcing into the foreground as a matter of immediate concern. This opened up a vast area of consideration left untouched

by the Whitley recommendations. 'It is for this reason that the Unions most conscious of their industrial powers i.e. the miners, the railwaymen and the engineers, together with the advocates of State or Guild Socialism, have exhibited little sympathy with the Whitley Report. Yet even a minimum of control, without going so far as any of these recommend, would involve a transformation which may be likened to the transformation from secret to open diplomacy and involves similar difficulties to those encountered in that process.'<sup>45</sup>

In the MOL's view, to meet the threat 'an absolute minimum necessary would appear to be throughout the whole field of industry the throwing open to examination of the workpeople or their representatives all the commercial and financial processes of business and incidentally in the words of the Report on Trusts "the institution of machinery for the investigation of the operation of monopolies, trusts and combines." ' The MOL emphasised however that this was a step regarded as drastic and even impossible by the majority of employers. On the workers' side it was rigidly held that shorter hours with unaltered earnings and simple time rates without any appeal to extra exertion in the way of bonuses did not have an adverse effect on output. The fact was however that, 'workpeople being after all human, this is simply not true ... Evidence is accumulating which goes to show that inflated

industrial power coupled with lack of responsibility for any results of action taken are already having adverse effects on production. But it is difficult to see how such an unpleasant and unpopular fact can be adequately driven home by demonstration alone and it may be the wiser and in the long run the only stable solution of the difficulty to concede something to the demands made by labour itself along another line, that of control, and leave the truth to demonstrate itself by the visible and obvious working of cause and effect. Certain organised bodies of workpeople are in a position to force certain results. It is only a question whether they shall or shall not be exempted from responsibility for the consequences both before and after the fact. If they are not exempted then the gain will be immeasurable in steadying not only their aggressive action before but also their resentment after, even though such a course is one of very great difficulty owing to the commercial considerations involved, to which labour is not accustomed.' The only logical alternative to this course in the Ministry's view was 'boldly to deny that these labour organisations are as strong as they appear to be and prepare to shatter them in industrial conflict. This course must sooner or later lead to a struggle which can only be disastrous, whatever its upshot.'<sup>46</sup>

However divisions began to appear within the ranks of labour which exposed weaknesses within the leadership



of the Triple Alliance and the labour movement generally, allowed the state to step back from the measures outlined above and to revise its estimation of the impact of the inevitable struggle.

Firstly, for the MOL there were the events at the Miners' Federation Conference at Keswick on the 15th of July.<sup>47</sup> At the Conference it was decided that the Government's offer to defer the proposed increase in the price of coal for three months if the Labour Party would guarantee no strikes or stoppages and the miners agreed to increase output be rejected. No ballot of the members had been taken on this issue. The Conference believed that this offer was not final and that the situation was still subject to negotiation. There was suspicion on the part of the miners that the Prime Minister's offer was an attempt to postpone a Cabinet decision on nationalisation. The Conference decided that if the Prime Minister would give an undertaking that the Government would decide the question within a limited time and couple this with an exhortation to the miners not to strike and to increase output this would be put to the miners by ballot and conference and an agreement reached. The MOL was of the view that this initiative betrayed a lack of appreciation of the situation by miners' leaders - a certain naivety. The prospect of an amicable agreement was remote in view of the extent to which the miners' strikes in Yorkshire had gone and the Government's action in connection with

them.<sup>48</sup> The question of nationalisation had been settled long before. The final reports of the Sankey Commission had been presented to the Government on June the 20th. The Commission was split on the question of nationalisation. The Yorkshire miners' strike and the decline in the output of coal were to be the Government's reasons for its decision to reject nationalisation. The announcement of this decision had been delayed.<sup>49</sup>

At the Conference an attempt to authorise the executive Committee of the Federation to declare a strike without taking a ballot of the members was defeated. For the MOL this was 'interesting as an indication that the rank and file are inclined to distrust a policy which gives practically unlimited powers to the Executive.'<sup>50</sup> The proposer of this motion urged that new machinery was needed to meet new circumstances that were going to arise. The Federation had joined the Triple Alliance and it was not desirable in a crisis that they should have to stand peacefully waiting until a ballot had been taken. This motion was opposed on the grounds that it was not democratic but autocratic and W.Brace M.P. (member MFGB Executive) characterised it as reactionary and said that he objected to being controlled by an 'oligarchy of his own class.'<sup>51</sup> The proposal was rejected by a large majority. The MOL noted that in recent years extremists had made several unsuccessful attempts to give the Executive or a National Conference

power to call a national strike and that the latest effort was not unconnected with the fact that the National Union of railwaymen have the power to call a strike without a ballot and thus, so far as they are concerned, to put into immediate effect any decision of the Triple Alliance with regard to direct action.

The Conference displayed considerable anxiety over the disciplinary aspect of unofficial strikes. Vernon Hartshorn M.P. and Smillie (both MFGB Executive) expressed regret at the action of South Wales surfacemen who had struck against the hours of work fixed by the Sankey Award. Smillie called on the men to go back to work saying 'To have men striking against conditions accepted by a ballot vote of all the members would destroy the Federation.'<sup>52</sup> The MOL noted that intelligence sources had reported that many of the miners' leaders viewed with alarm the prevalence of unofficial strikes and freely admitted that the men were in some cases getting out of hand.

By late August the MOL was convinced that some influential leaders of the labour movement were not in favour of direct action.

There were 'signs that the "direct action" issue is leading to a sharp cleavage of opinion in the Labour world.'<sup>53</sup> It was acknowledged that the opinion of the rank and file of the Triple Alliance on the policy of direct action would not be known until the 25th of

August when the results of a ballot on the issue were released. However the MOL saw as encouraging and influential on the results the fact that the Labour Party had declined to commit itself on the matter and that the President of the NUR and the secretaries of the MFGB and the Transport Workers' Federation had publicly declared that 'the working class in general and the organised workers in particular derive more advantage from a clear and unprejudiced presentation of their claims and aspirations by and through a Labour daily newspaper than by costly strikes and wage movements.'<sup>54</sup>

The Ministry of Labour also attached much significance to the TUC conference in Glasgow on the 10th of September 1919 which had revealed opposing factions within the leadership of the labour movement <sup>55</sup>. It was noted that much publicity had been given to the fact that this Congress was the largest on record representing over five million trade unionists - more than double the membership before the war - and that the Congress now claimed to speak for a larger body of opinion than any national gathering in the world. Its publicity notwithstanding, the MOL discerned 'much dissatisfaction among the Unions affiliated to it on the grounds that its actual effective power, when compared with its enormous latent potentialities, is very much less than it ought to be.'<sup>56</sup> The Ministry acknowledged that this criticism was not new but it was

observed that it had become very prominent in connection with the Triple Alliance's demand that the Congress declare its stance on the Government's policy in regard to Russia, conscription and so on. The TUC stood accused by the intelligentsia of the Labour movement of being fettered by its history and of making little attempt to address itself to the task that urgently awaited it, namely the constitution of a body able to give shape to the expressed policy of the trade union movement and of a general staff to coordinate the forces of Labour in the industrial field, especially as regards the problem of industrial and craft unionism. It was generally believed by its critics that the TUC should devote itself to an effort in the industrial sphere to link up the sectional efforts and programmes of labour into a common policy and scheme of action.

The Triple Alliance found fault with the TUC on the question of direct action. The definite movement in favour of direct action had been inaugurated at a Conference of the Alliance at Southport on the 16th of April. It took the form of a resolution urging the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC to convene a special National Conference to consider whether industrial action should be taken to compel the Government to accede to the abolition of conscription, the withdrawal of British troops from Russia, the raising of the blockade and the release of conscientious objectors. At this time the Alliance was flushed with success at

obtaining from the Government most of the concessions demanded in the national programmes which two of the constituent bodies formulated on the conclusion of the armistice. Subsequent events brought the Alliance into sharp conflict with the Parliamentary Committee. Instead of supporting the Alliance the Parliamentary Committee sent a deputation to the Prime Minister and, in view of his assurances, decided not to call a National Conference. At this all the constituent bodies of the Alliance endorsed the policy of direct action at their annual conferences. At a full delegate conference on the 23rd of July the Alliance pledged itself to pursue its policy of direct action and recommended a ballot of Triple Alliance members to ascertain whether they were prepared to take industrial action to enforce their demands.

While the whole industrial and political situation was overcast waiting for the decision of the members of the Triple Alliance on direct action there was an unsuccessful attempt at coordination and exploitation of strikes by extremist elements. Against a favourable background characterised by a general spirit of discontent, the unsettled miners strike in Yorkshire and the dispute in the baking trade, the Police Strike erupted. The latter 'deliberately and secretly organised by agitators in the Police Union, was sprung on the country and was followed by riots in Liverpool and the sympathetic strike by L&SW railwaymen and

others.' The MOL was of the view that 'There can be little doubt that if the police strike had succeeded, the events which occurred in Liverpool would have taken place elsewhere also and that extremists in various branches of industry might have attempted to call sympathetic strikes on a large scale. It is not intended to maintain that there was a causal connection between all the strikes and events that have been mentioned, but it is probable that their coexistence was not purely fortuitous.'<sup>57</sup>

In the wake of this abortive coup the rank and file of the Triple Alliance reacted against the policy of direct action. The MOL concluded that this reaction was not unconnected with the complete failure of the revolutionary police and sympathetic strikes and that it had exerted a sobering effect on the Alliance. Its executive postponed the ballot and the full delegate conference homologated the decision and agreed to adjourn the whole matter until a meeting of the TUC was convened to consider the issue. The MOL concluded 'that from the point of view of the Alliance, the policy of Direct Action was wrecked by the conservative constitutionalism of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, for if it had consented to convene a National Conference in June or July when the revolutionary elements in labour were at the height of their power, it is not impossible that that policy might have been endorsed.'<sup>58</sup> For the MOL the threat of direct action

had dissipated and further proof of this was to be found in the railway dispute.

### **The Railwaymen**

The railwaymen, like the miners, presented a programme of demands to the Railway Executive Committee in March 1919. The 'Leicester Programme' had been drafted by the NUR in 1917 and included demands for equal representation both locally and nationally for the NUR in the management of all UK railways; standardised conditions of service for all railwaymen; an eight hour day ; the conversion of war wages to permanent wages. The eight hour day had come into operation on February 1st 1919 but the remainder of the Leicester Programme met with resistance. "The Times" reported on March 18th 1919 that the Railway Executive and the Board of Trade 'had been pursuing the usual policy of haggling over every point , trying to make the smallest possible concession and grudgingly giving way by degrees.' There was growing unrest among railwaymen at the delay and resistance to their demands and on 20th March the NUR voted to ask for Triple Alliance support in calling a strike. The Triple Alliance were against a strike at that time but their leaders were summoned by Lloyd George and informed of the dangers inherent in a confrontation with the state. The leaders of the Triple Alliance confirmed that an attack on the state was not their intention and the NUR was given an undertaking



that wages would be "standardised upwards." The NUR called off the strike pending negotiations.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile a settlement 'unparalleled in the history of British locomotivemen'<sup>60</sup> had been awarded to ASLEF. This settlement was reached on August the 20th, the day after the Government rejected coal nationalisation. This move was widely seen as 'one way of weakening the railwaymen's forces' ie., settling the locomotivemen's claims generously so that they might be less inclined to support other grades' claims with strike action. The NUR wanted this "standardisation upwards" to be awarded to all grades to prevent local and sectional strikes. On 19th September the Board of Trade forwarded proposals to the Executive of the NUR which included a list of swingeing wage cuts with the message that they were 'not a basis for negotiation ' but 'a definitive offer of the Government'.<sup>61</sup> A national railway strike began on the 26th September 1919 which the Prime Minister labelled 'an anarchist conspiracy.'<sup>62</sup> The NUR made no appeal to the Triple Alliance for support.

Emergency arrangements on a huge scale came into operation for the transport and distribution of food etc., and six thousand servicemen and military vehicles were deployed to maintain order and supplies. Civilian volunteers provided a skeleton railway service and were paid standard rate plus bonuses of 50% of earnings.

In early October 1919 the MOL reported on the strike to the Cabinet.<sup>63</sup> This report began by singling out the distinguishing features of the strike as its size and the reluctance of those directing it to further extend the area of the strike. It was noted 'Usually it is of advantage from the strikers' point of view so far as possible to extend the area of a strike. Hence the policy of federation and amalgamation and the policy of "sympathetic action." ' The reasons why the leaders had not extended the strike were analysed by the MOL. Firstly it was noted that the extension of the strike was unnecessary 'because the National Union of Railwaymen were by their size and position already able to bring sufficient pressure to enforce any demand that mere pressure can enforce.' This had been well illustrated by their ability to carry matters to the supreme head of the Government whenever they had a mind to. The Ministry however was careful to point out that this did not mean that the Triple Alliance was an unnecessary organisation but that its limits had become clear. 'It is a first class manoeuvring weapon, but how far it is useful through its mere capacity to strike as a whole is another matter.' There was another important consideration which was exercising the minds of the railwaymen's leaders and which guided their activities. This could be most clearly illustrated through a comparison of the positions of two key figures in the railway dispute, Mr Cramp and Mr Thomas.<sup>64</sup>

Intelligence received by the MOL revealed that Mr Cramp and Mr Thomas had made their positions clear at Carlisle on the 25th of May. Cramp was reported to have consulted other members of the Triple Alliance over the progress of the strike and presented the situation in revolutionary terms. Cramp expressed doubt as to whether the rank and file understood what was happening - revolution. The question for Cramp was 'were the people clear eyed and conscious of the fact which was involved, because it meant either revolution or defeat? Whenever they said they were ripe for industrial revolution, he was with them, but not for them to enter it merely under the belief that they were out for a trade dispute. Let them approach it with their eyes open and be prepared to carry it through, but do not let them through false pretences, engineer a thing of this kind unless the people they were calling upon to follow them knew what they had to go through.' Despite his rhetoric, the Ministry noted Cramp's hesitation and his reluctance to extend the strike and concluded that he was not a serious revolutionary. 'If he is thinking in terms of revolution and not of a trade dispute, [he] should be all for the extension still farther of the area of the strike. He should want to completely disorganise and finally paralyse the present system of government. For this no more effective means could be devised than the simultaneous strike of all the members of the Triple Alliance, the Postal Federation and the ETU and the newspaper compositors. In the complete

breakdown which would ensue Mr Cramp might have an opportunity of establishing a social order more in consonance with his ideals.'<sup>65</sup>

Although the attitude of Mr Cramp appeared more threatening, Mr Thomas's attitude was the more interesting and more important in the MOL's view because it was 'more on the plane of practical politics.' It was noted that Mr Thomas was a strong opponent of direct action and an upholder of the ballot box method of revolution. Mr Thomas hesitated to extend the strike area because he was aware that he had already applied sufficient pressure 'to do anything that pressure will do.' Mr Thomas explained his restraint in terms of the interests of the community. The MOL commented 'this may be quite sincere, though hardly in just the way Mr Thomas suggests.' The reason for Mr Thomas's forbearance according to the MOL was that he understood the limits placed on trade union action by the working class. 'He is indeed much concerned at the attitude of the community but the reason is he stands or falls by that attitude and this is the consideration which must govern his policy as regards the extension of the strike. Unless he wishes forcibly to overturn the whole existing order, beyond a certain point public opinion must decide the issue. No single body can stand against an overwhelmingly hostile community. But this consideration applies equally to the attitude of the Government. The Government also in

a matter such as this must be ruled by public opinion, and since much of this opinion is labour opinion, it has been desirable to do nothing in the course of measures taken in connection with the strike which involves principles to which labour is solidly hostile without making abundantly clear that it was necessary and why. This is why it was desirable to concentrate rather on organising emergency means of transport than a direct attack on the Union e.g. through its funds, or on forcibly carrying on the railways with soldiers &c. It has also been desirable in appealing for volunteers to be careful that appeals should not be so framed as to appear to be applicable to one social class in the community, as for example, an appeal for all to lend their motor cars. This brings the conception of the class war dangerously into prominence.<sup>66</sup>

The strike was settled on 5th October on the basis of no wage reductions till the 30th September 1921, negotiations about new standard rates, wages tied to the cost of living and repayment of wage arrears. Bagwell (1963) notes that the strike successfully frustrated the attempt to reduce railwaymen's wages but did nothing about the problem of the future organisation of the transport industry and the Railway Act 1921 avoided nationalisation by forcing the majority of existing lines into four companies to be privately owned and run for profit.

By mid March 1920 the MOL could report to the Cabinet that agitation for industrial action on a considerable scale to secure political ends was at an end and that 'interest has been transferred from schemes for the control of industry to claims for further wage advances.'<sup>67</sup>

#### Summary and Conclusion

The National Industrial Conference was summoned by the Minister of Labour (Robert Horne) on the 27th of February 1919 to consider the question of industrial unrest. On a resolution proposed by the Prime Minister a Provisional Joint Committee consisting of sixty members with Sir Thomas Munro as chairman was appointed. The Triple Alliance and the ASE abstained from participation in the Joint Committee and the National Union of Railwaymen took the view that 'no useful purpose is served by collusion with the employers through the Government to maintain the existing order of society,'<sup>68</sup>

The Committee appointed three sub committees dealing with wages, hours and legal minimum wages and unemployment. On the 4th of April 1919 they produced a report recommending legal minimum wage rates, the extension of trade boards and the continuance of the Wages (Temporary Regulation) Act. The last two

recommendations were accepted but the extension of the trade boards was held to make a national minimum wage unnecessary. The Committee also recommended a maximum working week of forty eight hours for all employed persons. To address unemployment they recommended organised short time, regulation of Government orders, housing schemes and the maintenance of unemployed workers. The Committee reported back to the conference which passed the following resolution. 'That this Joint National Industrial Conference welcomes this report of the Provisional Joint Committee and agrees to submit it for the acceptance of its constituent organisations immediately the Government officially declares their readiness to proceed at once with the legislative and other steps necessary to carry the report into effect. That the Provisional Joint Committee remain in being until the National Industrial Council and the Standing Committee have been brought into operation.'

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The Prime Minister received the report and stated 'Though I cannot commit myself to every detail, as many of them are technical, I may say at once that I fully accept in principle your recommendations as to the fixing of maximum hours and minimum rates of wages ... As regards wages I accept the principle that minimum rates of wages should in all industries be made applicable by law ... I gladly accept your suggestion that the Government should in the first place set up a commission with wide terms of reference to report on

the whole matter ... I welcome your proposal to set up a National Council and hope that you will take steps to bring it into being as quickly as possible, as I assume it will be of great value in assisting the Government to improve industrial conditions.'<sup>70</sup>

On the 29th of April Sir Robert Horne (the Minister of Labour) called a meeting of representatives of the Provisional Joint Council to take place on the 1st of May. At this meeting three of the recommendations of the Report were qualified. The government wanted to exclude agricultural workers and seamen from any legislation on hours and to advise that there would be no legislation on minimum wages. Instead an enquiry was to be set up on minimum wages. It was made clear that the setting up of a National Industrial Council was to be the responsibility of the PJC and not the government and the government agreed to extend the Wages (Temporary Legislation) Act for six months. The meeting adjourned to meet again on the 29th of May when the government proposed new exceptions to proposed legislation on hours - clerks and post office workers. Beyond this no other matters were settled but Horne emphasised 'I am speaking absolutely from my heart ... I expect you to believe that the government in this matter is determined to carry out your wishes and make fruitful and put into legislative enactment the principles you have enunciated.'<sup>71</sup> The Committee was prepared to accept exemptions but only if these were



negotiated after the legislation was in force on the conditions laid down in the Report. Legislation was introduced into the House of Commons in August concerning the establishment of a Committee of Enquiry on wages and a maximum 48 hour week with the exception of agricultural workers, seamen etc,. The Wages Act lapsed while the Bill on hours and wages was being considered. In November 1919 the labour side of the Conference called a meeting of the PJC where it was concluded that the government's position had been made clear by the Minister of Labour who had emphasised that the government had no intention of handing over 'to any body of people, however eminent,'<sup>72</sup> its responsibilities in the matter of legislation. The PJC had exceeded its authority as far as the state was concerned.

The Government sounded the death knell of the NIC when on the 17th of June 1920 the new Minister of Labour, T.J. Macnamara, presented the Joint Committee with a redrafted Hours Bill which deviated appreciably from the Report of the Joint Committee. In July 1921 hopes for the NIC as the mechanism for a British revolution finally died when the Government refused to accept the Committee's report despite Lloyd George's assurances that the government would give it "immediate and sympathetic consideration".<sup>73</sup> The PJC resigned.

By way of explanation, LLOYD George communicated with those concerned through the Ministry of Labour saying

that the Provisional Joint Committee had not been fully representative of the important industries of the country, the miners, the railwaymen, the transport workers and the engineers and that it had not been possible to give legislative effect to all the recommendations of the Joint Committee.<sup>74</sup> He thanked the PJC for the 'good work it had done to inculcate a spirit of cooperation between employers and employed at a crucial time' and appreciated its role in 'creating a steadying influence' during reconstruction.<sup>75</sup>

The claim that the PJC had not been fully representative of the important industries of the country is undermined by Wrigley<sup>76</sup> who notes that at the first meeting of the conference Lloyd George showed no anxiety about whether the conference was representative of all shades of opinion and even brushed aside arguments that those present did not have a mandate. Also to argue that a cause of the conference's failure was that labour's demands were too great is to overlook the fact that this was the major reason for calling the conference in the first place.<sup>77</sup> The claim that the failure of the NIC was due to lack of unity on the labour side is also questioned by Wrigley who points out that this may have been one of the reasons why it was called. There was every likelihood that the conference would emphasise and exacerbate the divisions within the labour movement - that its activities would 'divide and rule' the labour

movement. For instance the fact that the conference was made up of trade union and Labour Party leaders who believed in constitutional methods together with the fact that its proposal for a National Joint Industrial Council attracted workers who did not have the industrial muscle of the powerful unions in the Triple Alliance, highlighted the divisions within the organised working class. In addition the state's actions surrounding the recommendations of the PJC - its delaying tactics and its internal deliberations reveal that its main concerns in calling the conference were the threatened strike of the Triple Alliance, the disregard of trade union authority displayed in the strikes involving the engineers and power workers and the need to publicly shift responsibility for serious industrial unrest back to both sides of industry and away from the state.

From May onwards the state adopted the approach favoured by the German government and took no action on the key recommendations of the PJC while purporting to represent everything it was striving for. At the same time the state took care to restrict the opportunities available to the Triple Alliance for exercising its industrial muscle. By late September 1919 it had become apparent to the MOL that the threat of direct action had receded, that the labour movement as a whole was fragmented and that a strike of the Triple Alliance was

unlikely. The NIC served no purpose against this background and eventually broke up.

- 1 Johnson, 1968.
- 2 Quoted in Lowe, 1978. PP.270-286.
- 3 Cole, 1923. p.75.
- 4 Charles, 1973 p.249.
- 5 Middlemas, 1979 p.381.
- 6 Ibid p.140.
- 7 Lowe, 1978.
- 8 PRO LAB 2/775/3. March 1922.
- 9 Wrigley, 1990 p.138.
- 10 Fox, 1985 p.300.
- 11 Miliband, 1972 p.66.
- 12 PRO CAB 23/9 WC 522. 30/1/1919.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Middlemas, 1979 p.93.
- 15 PRO CAB 23/9 WC522 30/1/1919.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Butler & Butler, 1986.
- 18 Cole, 1923.
- 19 Miliband, 1972 p.66.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Redmayne, 1923 p.218.
- 22 Clegg, 1985 p.276
- 23 Jeffery & Hennessy, 1983 p.3.
- 24 PRO CAB 23/15;GT6998. PRO CAB 23/15;WC546a. PRO CAB 27/60 176785 1919.
- 25 PRO Cab 24/90 Report on the Labour Situation by the Ministry of Labour week ending 21st May 1919.
- 26 Ibid.

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27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 PRO LAB 2/254/13 December 1917.

34 PRO CAB 24/80 Report on the Labour Situation by the Ministry of Labour week ending 28th May 1919.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 PRO CAB 24/81 Report on the Labour Situation from the Ministry of Labour week ending 4th of June 1919.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 23rd July 1919.

48 PRO CAB 23/15 WC 595A 21st July 1919. An unofficial strike of Yorkshire miners erupted on July the 17th over the Government's interpretation of the recommendations of the interim report of the Sankey

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Commission on higher wages and the 7 hour day. The Government increased the price of coal and issued an order preventing any increase in piece rates in excess of 10% while negotiations over working hours were in progress. This strike provoked alarm in the Cabinet and was described as "practical Bolshevism." Troops were sent to the coalfield and naval ratings manned the pumps.

49 PRO CAB 23/15 WC 607A 7th August 1919.

50 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour week ending 23rd July 1919.

51 Ibid p.65.

52 Ibid.

53 PRO MUN 5/55 Ministry of Labour Report on the Labour Situation 20th August 1919.

54 Ibid p.118.

55 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 10th September 1919.

56 Ibid p.216.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid p.217.

59 Bagwell, 1963.

60 McKillop, 1950 p.122.

61 Bagwell, 1963 p.383.

62 The Times 29th Sept 1919.

63 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 1st of October 1919.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 PRO LAB 2/758/2 Report from the Ministry of Labour  
17th of March 1920.

68 Railway Review 27th June 1919.

69 PRO LAB 2/775//3 7th March 1922.

70 Minutes of Proceedings of the National Industrial  
Conference Provisional Joint Committee 1st May 1919.

71 Quoted in Charles 1973 p.246.

72 PRO LAB 2/556/WA 7809. Sept 1919.

73 The Times. 5th April 1919

74 PRO LAB 2/775/3.1st February 1922.

75 Charles, 1973 p.249.

76 Wrigley, 1990 p.138.

77 Ibid p.140.



## Chapter 8

### Conclusions

This study has attempted to chart continuity and change in the character of state industrial relations policy and the role of trade unions and trade union leaders in that policy in the period 1910-21. These objectives have been pursued through an analysis of the papers of state agencies responsible for the formulation and implementation of industrial relations policy at this time. In this chapter I will summarise the conclusions of each chapter and discuss some of the main themes which have been examined in the study. Finally I will analyse the implications of the study for the rank and filist perspective.

The first chapter defines the study as one in the sociology of industrial relations because its central focus is the role of trade unions and their officials in the state's management of industrial conflict in 1910-21 and the core of industrial relations is trade unionism. With this in mind I detailed the contradictory role of trade unions and outlined those theories of trade unionism which inform the analyses which influenced the thesis. This provided the theoretical context for the empirical examination of the relation between the state and trade unions in the

management of industrial conflict. This chapter, after assessing these theories, concluded that the key to continuity and change and the role of trade unions in industrial relations policy in this period was the state's assessment of the temper of the working class and the nature of worker organisation.

Chapter two outlines the development of trade union organisation from the late 19th century in Britain and assesses the impact of syndicalism and industrial unionism on this development. It concludes that the conflation of the two separate movements under the rubric **syndicalism** by influential analysts has given rise to a misunderstanding of the nature of worker organisation and industrial conflict at this time. It was a peculiarly British hybrid of industrial unionism and syndicalism which, combined with widespread worker discontent and disillusionment with established trade unionism, caught the imagination of workers.

Chapter three sketches the historical development of the relationship between the state and trade unions and analyses the process by which the state came to promote and participate in conciliation with a view to reducing industrial conflict. It focuses on the understandings of industrial conflict and of trade unionism on which the policy of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade and its successors rested and on exploring the

distinctiveness of this apparatus of state intervention.

This chapter concludes that the state's understanding of industrial conflict, of trade unions and of trade union leaders corresponded with rank and filist premises. These are firstly that workers have a reservoir of latent power which is contained by well organised and responsibly led trade unions, secondly that a clear line of demarcation can be drawn between the leadership of trade unions, activists and the rank and file and thirdly that trade union officialdom is synonymous with moderation. It was believed that the conservatism of trade union officials in industrial relations inclined them towards constitutional methods rather than industrial action and that they tended to prioritise their own role in negotiations with management at the expense of mass participation in union activities. These conceptions underpinned the state's enthusiasm for conciliation, which was based on the promotion, as opposed to the repression of trade unionism, in the management of industrial conflict. This chapter provided a standpoint from which to view the state's management of industrial conflict throughout 1910-21

The "Great Unrest" began in 1910 and chapter four highlights the concerns of the state in managing the industrial conflict. It confirms that the aim of the

state in the field of conciliation was not to redress the balance in favour of the working class in industrial bargaining but to prevent the development of worker organisation of a scale and coherence which could dislocate the country.

The state's analyses of industrial conflict found that the aims of the workers were not revolutionary in the sense that they did not subscribe en masse to any particular radical agenda. Workers were primarily interested in wage issues and, with these uppermost they adopted the methods of syndicalism being promoted by the new generation of union leaders rather than its aims. The methods of syndicalism - direct action - combined with a critique of moderate trade unionism borrowed from industrial unionism lent a new coherence, scale and efficacy to worker organisation, and the leaders of the established trade unions, who subscribed to traditional bargaining procedures, lost influence with their members. This new pattern of organisation was most apparent in key industries and constituted a potential "national danger" which could be realised through ill considered action on the part of the state. The danger lay in the fact that in itself this organisation could dislocate the economy and produce a major degree of civil disturbance.

Against this background both legislation and force were seen as problematic. It was not certain that workers

would comply with any legislation and it was thought possible that the use of force would inflame the situation and make the state the focus of the conflict. However state intervention was needed to avert the need for further state intervention.<sup>1</sup> The state's response was to set up the Industrial Council which bought time during which existing conciliation machinery for curtailing disputes could be strengthened and directed with increased vigour towards disorganising the "wonderful combination" which underpinned the threat.

Chapter five presents an account of the origins and consequences of the MOW Act. It concentrates on the ways in which worker organisation and resistance constrained the measures taken by the state to discipline workers, increase productivity and prosecute the war. Initially recruitment to the armed services caused an increasingly serious labour shortage and a corresponding increase in workers' bargaining power, and the state called on trade unions to cooperate in preventing strikes and implementing dilution. This measure failed because trade union leaders proved unable to deliver their members' cooperation and industrial conflict began to escalate. The MOW Act was passed to prohibit strikes and impose dilution. In the event however, the MOW Act generated and provided a focus for industrial conflict, increased resistance to dilution, reinforced the belief that union leaders had betrayed workers' interests, turned many workers

against responsible trade unionism and provided further impetus for the changes already taking place in worker organisation. Trade union leaders' apparent cooperation with the state adversely affected their relationship with their members many of whom believed that they had come to represent employers and the state against them. This provided the impetus for the formation of rank and file movements in munitions, engineering and shipbuilding and provided a platform and a focus for the new ideas and new organisation which aimed to supersede them. It was the unofficial movement which had the confidence of the workers, and this was realised by state agencies.

The state sought to address the situation by modifying the MOW Act and relying heavily on the cooperation of the ASE in the implementation of labour policy. The price of its cooperation was however high in terms of both the reorganisation of production and the management of industrial conflict. Leaders of the ASE saw their priority as their members' interests which were not the same as the "national interest" as defined by the state. As a result the relationship between the state and this trade union deteriorated and the implementation of war time labour policy was further impeded.

Chapter six examines industrial conflict during 1916-18 from the perspective of the Ministry of Labour. This

chapter highlights the fragmented nature of the state. It shows that the state is a set of heirarchical institutions, some in ascendance, some in decline, with overlapping responsibilities and contradictory objectives. It illustrates that the role of the Cabinet is to at least formally resolve departmental dispute and maintain a facade of unity while executing policy which may often be an amalgam of policies formulated by more than one department. The MOL found that the measures taken by the Ministry of Munitions in respect of industrial unrest had been ill considered and inappropriate and provided a clear example of the disadvantages of direct state intervention. In particular, action had been taken without sufficient regard to developments in the relationship between the official trade unions, the shop stewards and the rank and file and within the shop stewards' movement. The MOL believed that the confrontational approach adopted by the Ministry of Munitions and the provisions of the MOW Act had decreased the divisions within trade unionism. There was no longer any clear opposition between the official and the unofficial movement and the latter had the practical support of the former. Nevertheless although the shop stewards' aims were radical the aims of the rank and file were not. The workers used the shop stewards to represent their interests because they had little choice and not because they supported their aims. The workers however, interpreted the intervention of the Ministry of

Munitions as a challenge to their right to elect their own leaders and the state became a clear target for workers' discontent. This was fortuitous for the shop stewards who were able to strengthen their own organisation but dangerous for the state which now had few options left for maintaining control. A widely favoured solution was the Whitley Scheme which aimed to institutionalise and therefore neutralise the shop stewards and promote responsible trade unionism. However, although the the MOL believed that its continued existence and authority was to a large extent tied up with the implementation of the Whitley scheme and the status and functions given to structures set up under it by the state, it was at pains to point out its shortcomings as a solution to industrial conflict. Despite its rhetoric the Whitley Scheme offered an expansion of conciliation - the consolidation of the status quo in industrial relations - when those powerful, because well organised, sections of the working class at which it was aimed were demanding the control of industry by the workers. The climate created by the MOW Act and the Ministry of Munitions' handling of industrial unrest during the war rendered the MOL's task, the management of industrial conflict through conciliation, extremely difficult. The situation was temporarily defused by an upsurge of patriotism but there were fears of a resurgence of serious industrial conflict once the war was over.



These fears were realised. Chapter seven outlines industrial conflict after the end of the war and the state's response to it with particular reference to the National Industrial Conference. This chapter suggests that initially the industrial unrest was seen as a revolutionary challenge and preparations were made on two fronts. The state prepared for a war against labour manifest in the deployment of troops and meetings of the Industrial Unrest Committee and at the same time set up conferences, committees and commissions in a bid to negotiate the threat away. Meanwhile the progress of worker organisation was closely monitored and state agencies soon developed the view that divisions within the trade union movement had re-established themselves and that with judicious state intervention the strength of worker organisation could be diminished. The state adopted the approach favoured by the German government and took no action on the key recommendations of the Provisional Joint Committee of the National Industrial Conference while purporting to represent everything it was striving for. At the same time the state took care to restrict the opportunities available to the Triple Alliance for exercising its industrial muscle. By late September 1919 it had become apparent to the MOL that the threat of direct action had receded, the labour movement as a whole was fragmented, the workers less enamoured with their leaders and "direct action" and that a strike of the Triple Alliance was unlikely. The NIC served no purpose for the state against this

background, the Government disengaged itself and the Conference eventually broke up.

### Continuity and Change

The central proposition of this thesis is that an analysis of industrial relations policy from above in this period reveals consistency in that policy and that to a large extent this was due to how the state perceived the strength and character of worker organisation. Throughout the period the state formulated industrial relations policy with one eye on worker organisation and the other on the "national interest". State analyses of industrial conflict throughout this period suggest that workers did not subscribe in any consistent or informed way to the tenets of syndicalism, industrial unionism, pacifism or trade unionism. Workers were primarily interested in wage issues and allied themselves to leaders who proved their usefulness in this respect. In this period younger and more militant leaders drew on a mixture of syndicalism and industrial unionism to good effect. Worker organisation in Britain in the period 1910-21 was influenced by both of these movements as this study has shown. However trade union leaders such as Tom Mann superimposed some of the strategies and tactics of these movements on the traditions and models of organisation of the craft societies. They did not envisage revolution. One of the more influential

commentators, Eric Hobsbawm, rightly suggests that at best syndicalism was 'a slogan of the struggle and not a programme for social transformation' but wrongly concludes that there was no revolutionary threat at this time.<sup>2</sup> As this study has shown, workers were enamoured of this "new policy" because gains were achieved by it and the stock of leaders who subscribed to it rose. Leaders were carried along on the wave. For the state the strategies and tactics of syndicalism and industrial unionism added a new and threatening dimension to worker organisation because of their emphasis on empowering the rank and file of trade unionism rather than its officials - this was 'power without responsibility' - a potentially disastrous combination.<sup>3</sup>

This was the "national danger" which forced the state to intervene but limited the forms which intervention could take. The state could intervene by means of legislation but this further diminished the power of official trade unionism and there was the possibility that workers would not comply. This was borne out by the experience of the MOW Act. Industrial conflict could be forcibly suppressed by the police or the armed forces but this could bring 'the conception of the class war dangerously into prominence.'<sup>4</sup> and in some cases the loyalty of the police and the army was uncertain. The form of intervention with the fewest repercussions was conciliation involving the promotion

of responsible trade unionism and collective bargaining.

The state did not however envisage allocating a share of state power to the trade unions at any point in this period. This is illustrated in the deliberations surrounding the Industrial Council in 1911, where the idea of any devolution of state power was dismissed as a crude and unrealistic suggestion. Again in the aftermath of the MOW Act it was emphasised that the role of established trade unions was not to concern themselves with the detail of government policy but to impose it on their members - 'to exert all their force to remove these suspicions and to encourage the men and indeed I will not say coerce but bring every influence to bear on them.'<sup>5</sup> The MOL, commenting on the Whitley Scheme during 1916-18 noted that the problem with the latter as far as providing a solution to industrial conflict was concerned was precisely that it offered no executive powers to the trade unions. Lastly the negotiations surrounding the NIC and the MOL's analysis of it can be summed up in the statement to the Provisional Joint Committee by the Minister of Labour who emphasised that the government had no intention of handing over 'to any body of people, however eminent'<sup>6</sup> its responsibilities in the matter of legislation.

The aim of industrial relations policy during 1910-21 was, then, to fragment the organised industrial power

of labour. Throughout this period worker organisation displayed a combination of features which were defined by the state as a threat to the national interest. It was characterised by the potential for concerted action on a large scale which threatened economic and civil disturbance, a disregard of the methods of moderate trade unionism, widespread support among the working class and indifference to the law. The state's interpretation appeared to take seriously the warnings of Bagehot <sup>7</sup> that 'a political combination of the lower classes, as such and for their own objects, is an evil of the first magnitude.' In opting for conciliation it also adopted his view that this evil could only be averted by 'the greatest wisdom and the greatest foresight in the higher classes ... [who] ... must avoid, not only every evil, but every appearance of evil; while they still have the power they must remove, not only every grievance but where it is possible every seeming grievance too; they must willingly concede every claim which they can safely concede, in order that they may not have to concede unwillingly some claim which would impair the safety of the country.'

The trade unions were seen as the key to the management of industrial conflict at this time. They provided a channel of communication between the state and workers which was invaluable for the implementation of policy, for information on workers' concerns and for defusing potential sources of conflict. Most importantly it was

believed that moderate trade unions or to be more accurate, responsibly led trade unions, acted as a discipline and control on their members - they could prevent industrial conflict from reaching the point where repressive state intervention became inevitable.

However this thesis has highlighted the problems with the rank and filist approach during the period under study.

The state's perceptions of trade unions and trade union leaders were refined and tested by the experience of industrial conflict during these years and corresponded with a more sophisticated and qualified rank and filism.

Firstly it became clear that although there was a difference of interests between trade union officials and their members this had more to do with their functions and their role in collective bargaining than personal idiosyncracies or reformist political allegiances. Officials had to respond to mass sentiment to retain their position. 'The problem for the leaders is, on the one hand, to get their followers to do what may be necessary from the national point of view, without on the other either alienating their loyalty and jeopardising their interests.'<sup>8</sup> Secondly officials did not always favour conservatism at the expense of industrial action. Thirdly rank and file trade union members were not always prepared to fight militant struggles nor were they always passive or in awe of

their leaders (pace Michels). As Bramble emphasises, trade union officials' role is to conduct negotiations over the price and conditions under which labour power will be sold to employers. Union members however have no direct role in the collective bargaining arrangement. For them it is a means to an end and not a rationale for their existence.<sup>9</sup> In the period under study workers took action to achieve wage increases which transcended the procedures of collective bargaining when these did not achieve their aims. This action challenged the arrangements established by their leaders. This placed officials in a difficult position since their existence was predicated on their role in collective bargaining but their power depended on responding to pressure from their members. 'It is not generally realised what a delicate and difficult problem this is for such men in their official capacity to handle.'<sup>10</sup> They became less "responsible." Trade union officials' conservatism was therefore contingent on the pressure placed on them by their members as critics of the rank and filist perspective suggest.

At the beginning of the period moderate trade union leaders were challenged by new younger leaders more in tune with the mass enthusiasm of the rank and file for militant action. The reaction against established leaders persisted and was strengthened by war administration and legislation. This enhanced trade union officials' role in collective bargaining but

further weakened their standing with their members. Aware of the source of their power, officials, notably within the ASE, exploited the former to resist and modify the impact of dilution in their members' interests rather than the national interest. The state revised its view of trade union leaders. By 1918 it was concluded that, far from disciplining and controlling their members, officials were covertly supporting industrial action and colluding in their members' defiance of the law. After the end of the war it was believed that trade union leaders were now the controllers of organised industrial power which they were directing towards influencing state policy. The limits to trade union action, however, ultimately became clear when workers decided against "direct action" and trade union officials complied. For the MOL both government and trade union action was constrained by the working class. It was 'ruled by public opinion ... much of which was labour opinion' and 'public opinion must decide the issue ... no single body can stand against an overwhelmingly hostile community.'<sup>11</sup>



- 1 Lowe, 1986 p.130.
- 2 Hobsbawm 1984.p.277.
- 3 See chapter 6 p.14 this thesis.
- 4 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 1st October 1919.
- 5 See chapter 4 this thesis.
- 6 PRO LAB 2/556/WA 7809. Sept 1919.
- 7 Bagehot, 1949 p.272.
- 8 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 10th of September 1919.
- 9 Bramble, 1993. pp.39-61.
- 10 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 10th of September 1919.
- 11 PRO MUN 5/55 Report from the Ministry of Labour 1st of October 1919.

### Appendix : Methodology

This thesis is based on the following archival materials; Cabinet papers, the papers of the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Munitions, the Ministry of Labour, the Admiralty, the Ministry of Aviation and the Treasury at the Public Record Office, Kew. In addition I have consulted the papers of the the Royal Commission on Trade Unions 1867-69, the Royal Commission on Labour 1891-94, the Ministry of Labour and the Official History of The Ministry of Munitions at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick together with newspapers and material on syndicalism and industrial unionism in Britain held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford and the Working Class Movement Library, Salford. It is a study of industrial conflict from above not below. It is concerned with the way in which industrial conflict shaped industrial relations policy in a particular historical period. It could be argued that it relies too heavily on government records at the expense of trade union records but this is indispensable for a study of the evolution of policy.

In the course of research for the thesis it became apparent to me however, that some sources, invariably cited as useful and reliable in those analyses which rely on government records, should be looked at more critically. The sources most heavily used in studies of industrial relations policy are Cabinet papers, the

private papers, biographies, diaries and memoirs of key political figures of the time and the Official History of the Ministry of Munitions. Although I too have used these sources directly and indirectly through the use of secondary texts, I have approached them with the following provisos in mind.

I have used Cabinet records in conjunction with others, following Davidson's observations, as noted in the introduction, that before 1911 industrial unrest was rarely discussed by the Cabinet and after this time the initiative in formulating industrial relations policy remained with the Board of Trade. The part played by the Cabinet in policy making is restricted. Firstly because of the limits of time and human reason, it can never intervene in practice at more than an infinitesimally small proportion of points at which decisions are required. A second difficulty arises out of the political functions of the Cabinet. Its business is to govern not the Civil Service but the nation. The Cabinet is made up of a group of party leaders who represent different interests within the party, the party itself is sensitive to the danger of failure at the next election and the Cabinet is constantly under pressure from public opinion. The Cabinet is less a central directing authority than an organ of co-ordination for the different departments of state which acts as a final court of appeal in specific controversies but which can do little to lay down in general terms forms of organisation for the

administration as a whole. Even during war or times of emergency when the Cabinet may appear to offer comprehensive central direction it remains the case that the small group of individuals who make up the Cabinet and their advisors can grasp only some of the complexities of the situation. Their leadership is largely political and directed to the nation as a whole. The Cabinet can affect administration directly only by limited and judicious intervention at key points.<sup>1</sup>

Cabinet Minutes are the organised record of decisions by the British government on all matters of importance and they provide a continuous record of policy decisions and the main reasons for them, together with a network of cross references which ensure that nothing will be discussed in ignorance of action in related fields. However they were designed as an instrument of administration and not as a historical record.<sup>2</sup> Mowat <sup>3</sup> acknowledges that Cabinet papers 'will deepen our knowledge of what happened and of the information on which ministers or Cabinet decided to act' but warns that 'what the papers do not say, about motives or passions, the information they failed to supply to the government, will remain important, and light on these things will still have to be sought elsewhere.'<sup>4</sup>

Many writers have sought this information in the private papers, biographies, diaries and memoirs of politicians and civil servants. However these sources vary widely in

their reliability and usefulness. Turning to collections of private papers it must firstly be noted that they are of historical value and many collections have been published. However they rarely contain original government documents since these have to be returned to the Cabinet Office. Lloyd George refused to return important documents after writing his memoirs<sup>5</sup> as did Addison<sup>6</sup> but after his death in 1945 the more important documents were returned.

Biographies, while useful to the historian, are 'not a good way of writing history.' This is because the biographer's priority is to tell the story of someone's life bringing out his personality and importance and not to detail the individual's times except in as much as they affect him or her. Biography 'tells us much personal and inner detail that would otherwise be lost, but it consistently turns the hero's face to the sun.'<sup>7</sup>

To a much greater extent the same is true of diaries and memoirs. The reliability of diaries as sources turns on several factors - whether they were written up each day or some time after the events, whether the entries were altered when hindsight changed an impression or an event. In addition no diary has been published in its entirety and we have to trust the judgement of the individual who selected what was published. The status of diaries ultimately rests on whether the evidence of the diary is supported by evidence from other sources. A diary much

used by historians of the First World War is Thomas Jones' "Whitehall Diary". Its status as a source derives from its author who was Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet Office from 1916 and it is therefore 'a first hand record of a privileged observer.'<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless while this work adds considerably to our knowledge and understanding of political figures and events at the time and the working of the Cabinet Office it must be approached with the above reservations in mind.

As with diaries the usefulness of memoirs depends on whether the author prefers 'frankness to discretion' and on freedom with his own manuscript. Ex-ministers and civil servants must have their manuscripts vetted by the Cabinet office. Their reliability turns on the author's memory of events, on the wisdom of hindsight, the desire to justify oneself and on whether they were written by the author, co-written or ghosted. As Mowat points out the historian must use memoirs but with rigorously enforced safeguards, verification, confirmation from other sources, common sense and a general knowledge of the history of the time.<sup>9</sup>

The Official History of the Ministry of Munitions is the only official history of any part of the civilian side of World War 1 and is the standard reference for many writers on the latter half of the war. The Ministry of Munitions was set up in June 1915. In the first year of its existence it was proposed by a high ranking official

in the Department of Requirements and Statistics <sup>10</sup> that a record of its organisation and executive activity be kept because the Ministry's work was of 'peculiar significance to the political and social history of the country' and would contribute to 'the political intelligence of the nation',<sup>11</sup>

The Cabinet however, had already approved a plan to maintain a complete record of administrative action during the war to be used for the compilation of a War Book and saw the role of the proposed history of the Ministry of Munitions differently - as a reference work which would be useful in preparing for future wars and for the solution of problems in peacetime. It was to be 'the basis of any evidence to be laid before commissions of enquiry and as a guide for future action.'<sup>12</sup>

Heads of branches of the Ministry of Munitions were requested to provide statements of their work based 'partly on personal recollections ... partly on reports and memoranda recorded in the current papers of the department.'<sup>13</sup> Initially the work was primarily in the hands of the heads of the branches concerned who were left to decide for themselves what topics should be dealt with and how the emphasis should fall. There was no general plan and no attempt to cover large areas of ground which did not fall specifically within any single branch. Later the work became the responsibility of the Statistical Department of the Ministry which directed

other branches to specific topics. It was found however that departmental accounts were badly written and that they reflected the preoccupations of their heads of department e.g. "the Economic Structure of the Post War World" or "Trench Warfare Supplies". Skilled researchers were recruited to plan the work, to widen its perspective and cover all the ground for which the Ministry was responsible so that a History would be produced which could form the basis of useful research.

By the end of the war however, the work was not complete, many of the skilled personnel left, the Ministry faced dissolution and 'the scramble to get the work printed clearly led to serious faults in the History.'<sup>14</sup> In January 1920 the Treasury agreed to the employment of individual contributors, many of whom were students, on a piece work basis which turned the history into 'a system of indoor relief' which had 'all the disadvantages of complicated administration and unco-ordinated effort.'<sup>15</sup>

After the Armistice the Cabinet decided against the publication of the History. It was emphasised that 'there would be a good deal in the History which it would not be judicious to lay before everyone.' The work was to be made available to officials for official purposes only and it was decided that expenditure on it would end with the expiration of the Ministry at the end of 1921. In March 1920 the Cabinet decided in favour of publishing those parts 'recording the activities in regard to



industrial labour.'<sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Labour objected on the ground that this would lead to industrial conflict. It was agreed that these sections would be vetted by the Ministry of Labour before publication. In the event the Ministry of Labour required the revision of the entire text and the removal of all direct references to official documents.

The History was not published. Two hundred and fifty copies were made available to Ministries and official bodies. Its usefulness as a source of information on government policy has been diminished due to 'its dependence on one group of papers [which] somewhat unbalances the text.'<sup>17</sup> References are sparingly given and cannot be checked since the schedule of destruction prepared by the Master of the Rolls put a time limit in no case longer than seven years on the papers used by the Ministry to compile the History. In consequence 'there is no comprehensive and reliable body of documents to verify the story which was compiled and 'into the framework prepared for an economic and institutional discussion was fitted a description of administration.'<sup>18</sup>

My main aim in reviewing some of the most heavily used sources for the analysis of industrial conflict during 1910-21 has been to show that they should be used in conjunction with the papers of the departments of state from which industrial relations policy derived in this period in order to avoid the confusion of political talk

with administrative action. It has been a central contention of this thesis that a more accurate view of industrial relations policy in the period 1910-21 can be gained from a study of the papers of the departments from which it originated. These departments were the Board of Trade, the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions and the Ministry of Labour which inherited the powers and responsibility for the management of industrial conflict conferred by the Conciliation Act 1896.

This insight was the result of a study of the evolution of the state's practical involvement in industrial relations from the mid 19th century to the passing of the Conciliation Act 1896. My work in this area has relied to a great extent on the reports of the Royal Commissions of 1867-69 and 1891-94. Before it became the responsibility of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade these Commissions gathered vast amounts of information, statistics and evidence from many sources including trade unions, workers, employers and state departments such as the Board of Trade, the Treasury and the Local Government Board (Poor Law Commissioners). While it is true that the findings and recommendations of Royal Commissions do not always help to formulate policy and lead to action and that they are sometimes appointed to avoid a crisis by delay and postponement (e.g. The Coal Industry Commission 1919), reports from both kinds of Commissions are sources in themselves and are also historical facts. Inaction on

their recommendations is as much a decision of government as action.<sup>19</sup>

Locating the information on which ministers and Cabinet acted was however not simply a question of identifying the departments empowered to manage industrial conflict by the Conciliation Act. It is important to note here that some government papers do not reach the Public Record Office and many are accidentally or intentionally destroyed whilst others, in spite of the thirty year rule, are unavailable. In addition, not all of the available papers of state departments charged with responsibility for the formulation and implementation of industrial relations policy are equally useful. Documents which are ultimately published as official papers are usually the result of many drafts. These drafts are generally far more detailed and revealing than published papers in terms of how government policy developed. In the case of the Cabinet, drafts are difficult to locate and many no longer exist. Fortunately the archives of the agencies listed above contain much internal correspondence on policy with regard to industrial conflict and many drafts of documents either for publication, submission to the Cabinet and for briefing Ministers.

Access to these documents however, is made difficult by other factors. Documents, especially in the LAB 2 class list, (which include papers of the Board of Trade) are

difficult to use because they cover the whole range of Ministry business including general policy, industrial relations, establishment and trade boards and have been preserved in an uneven and disorganised way. There is an index to the LAB class at the PRO named LAB 7 which consists of many docket books of subject indexes which then have to be used with the indexes to LAB 2 which take up many volumes. As a result research in the LAB 2 class list can be time consuming and unrewarding and may contribute to the failure of analysts of this period to appreciate the richness of material available concerning the state's relationship with organised labour and the nature of industrial disputes in Britain at this time. Fortunately, while browsing among dictionaries and reference works in the field of industrial relations in Warwick University Library I discovered quite by chance that a listing and guide to LAB classes LAB 2, LAB 10, LAB 27, LAB 31 and LAB 34 had been compiled and a selection of the documents relating to industrial relations committed to microfilm, a copy of which had been deposited on the first floor of the library.<sup>20</sup> This saved much time at the Public Record Office.

- 1 Mackenzie & Grove 1957 pp.334-341.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Mowat, C.L. Great Britain Since 1914 Hodder & Stoughton 1971.
- 4 Ibid p68.
- 5 Lloyd George 1933-36.
- 6 Addison London 1934.
- 7 Mowat 1971 p90.
- 8 Ibid p102.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Godfrey Lloyd, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto seconded to the Ministry of Munitions in 1915.
- 11 AVIA 46/288 6th of April 1944.
- 12 Ibid p3.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid p8.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid p12.
- 17 Ibid p13.
- 18 Ibid p14.
- 19 Ibid p35.'
- 20 Harvester Microfilm Collection, 1985.

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on grounds of secrecy.

CAB 24 Memoranda 1915-39 papers circulated to  
the War Cabinet (GT series) from other  
state departments which formed  
the basis of the Cabinet's discussions -  
for use alongside conclusions.

CAB 27 Cabinet committees created 1917-22 - war  
policy, economy, demobilisation,  
industrial unrest, finance,  
unemployment, Ireland.

CAB 37 Cabinet papers from 1880-1916.

Ministry of Munitions MUN 5 Papers of the Historical  
Records Branch of the  
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Ministry of Labour      LAB 2    includes most of the  
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the Ministry of Labour until  
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range of Ministry  
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